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From Crisis to Habit: Re-Shaping Academic Conferences for Remote Communities

—Nikki Chasteen, Kevin Dvorak, Kelly Concannon, Eric Mason, and Janine Morris

By late summer 2021, SWCA board members, like many across the world, were hoping for a return to "normal." People were fatigued from being online for work and school and socializing, and they desired the kinds of interactions and connections that took place before the pandemic. As a board, SWCA was eager to go to Memphis that following winter for the long-awaited conference hosted by Christian Brothers University. However, by early September 2021, with new COVID-19 variants and cases spiking across the U.S., it was clear that we weren't there yet. The board decided that hosting the 2022 conference in person would put its members at unnecessary risk and announced on October 21, 2021, that the next SWCA would be online once again.

Once this decision had been made, the Writing and Communication Center (WCC) at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), in conjunction with NSU's Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts (DCMA), volunteered to host the online SWCA conference to be held in 2022. The 2021 conference had been hosted collectively by the SWCA board, but we felt that NSU hosting the online conference in 2022 would both play to the strengths of our center, M.A. program, and faculty, and would allow the SWCA board to focus its energies on other organizational needs. Once our offer was approved, we consulted with our center leadership team and began to make plans. The NSU WCC has a leadership team made up of Executive Director Kevin Dvorak, Ph.D.,

Assistant Director Nikki Chasteen, and three Faculty Coordinators who also teach in DCMA: Kelly Concannon, Ph.D.; Eric Mason, Ph.D.; and Janine Morris, Ph.D. Our connection to the SWCA board remained strong, however. During the time we planned and ran the conference, two of us also held key SWCA board positions: Janine was SWCA President, and Eric was the SWCA Digital Content Developer.

In some ways, producing the conference was easy. After all, our university had hosted SWCA conferences before, and, having served in SWCA leadership positions the previous year, members of the conference committee had been involved in doing much of the same work in producing the previous year's online conference, so we knew we could make use of some of the same tools and approaches we had used then. But we also knew that expectations might have changed over the course of the year. Empathetic understanding once offered by SWCA members to the SWCA board as they figured out how to run an online conference for the first time might no longer be present; patience for technological glitches or shifting deadlines might have worn thin; eagerness to attend another online event may have been reduced by "Zoom fatigue." Although changes instituted as schools and professional organizations shifted into crisis mode had become routine, many still wondered if they had actually addressed the critical needs of students and faculty.

Almost two years into the pandemic, and with all of this uncertainty in mind, we wondered what we could do to engage conference participants in needed conversations, how we could understand this period as an opportunity to maximize our most productive habits, and what lessons we had learned in the process. The conference theme—"Present Tense, Future Perfect: Shaping Purposeful Writing Center Practices"— acknowledged this period of uncertainty from which future writing center practices would ultimately emerge and encouraged participants to reflect on them. In addition to acknowledging the present moment, we also wanted to avoid replicating exactly what was done the previous year. Composition, in our view, is often a balance between convention and invention—between doing enough of what has been done before for an endeavor to remain recognizable and introducing innovative practices to provide new experiences that meet the needs of the present moment.

Basically, we asked ourselves: was the online SWCA conference experience (though only a year old) in need of an update?

The idea of installing updates is pretty much hardwired into our experiences with digital technologies, which often remind us to download them while offering nebulous warnings and performance improvements as reasons to act promptly. In *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, Wendy Chun provides insight into such processes by considering the ways new media technologies have led us into a cycle of habitual crises leading to constant changes to how we live and work. She notes how the digital networks that structure our lives contribute to this cycle by being built around imagined and embodied contradictions that make us feel simultaneously empowered and vulnerable. For instance, we simultaneously imagine and experience the internet as both an "anonymous and empowering space of freedom" and as a "space of total surveillance" (Chun *ix*). These contradictory visions are reinforced by the way in which new media and digital networks and the habits surrounding them blur the distinctions between what is public and what is private, between work and home, and between self and other.

Neither remote work nor a remote conference is immune to these contradictory visions. Remote workers revel in avoiding long commutes and having more freedom in how and when they work, even as they often find themselves monitored by "tattleware" installed on their digital devices that tracks what they type, view, and accomplish. Having the last two SWCA conferences online meant that a broader group of consultants and faculty could potentially attend the conference, but it also meant that the types of interactions these individuals could have were narrowed by technological and temporal constraints. While we may have wanted to encourage casual interactions (by having a virtual Zoom lobby, for instance, where anyone could drop in at any time to talk), we were also aware of potential repercussions of putting participants' unguarded actions on public display. This concern is one of the reasons that conference sessions at both of SWCA's online conferences required passwords and were never recorded—we thought that more privacy would contribute to safety and enhance the quality and openness of the discussions in each presentation.

Chun focuses on our digital interactions, interrogating the habits passed back and forth among users and devices, and argues that changes to these

habits are often initiated through "crisis." Based on the shift to remote learning and to online academic conferences over the last two years in response to the pandemic, it makes sense, then, to ask what sorts of habits emerged or persisted during this time. What did we learn and unlearn? And now that official restrictions have begun to subside, what do we want to purposefully sustain even as the status quo reasserts itself? In this essay, we use Chun's work to help us reflect on our experiences as hosts of the 2022 SWCA Conference—the SWCA's second (and, perhaps, last) online conference—to better understand how we moved from crisis to habit in delivering a virtual experience, and where we go from here.

Writing Out of Habit

Writers are sometimes known for their eccentric habits; some insist on writing while standing, or writing with purple ink, or writing at the same time every day. But just because we might not see ourselves as developing such specific habits does not mean that we all don't fall into some habitual mode of doing things. Chun argues that the "accrual of habit is central" to the experience of subjectivity and to the reproduction of ideology (6). We are, as Gilles Deleuze claims "nothing but habits—the habit of saying 'I'" (qtd. in Chun 6). But the centrality of habit to our sense of self makes it that much harder to notice, and Chun warns us that it is exactly by "disappearing from consciousness" that habits become most influential (*x*). This does not mean that habits are beyond scrutiny, however. In writing instruction, we routinely draw students' attention to habits as either techniques to attempt or pitfalls to avoid, calling them, respectively, "commonplaces" or "clichés." Reflective writing can be practiced with the goal of identifying and initiating changes in our habits. And the habits we target can be closely connected to identity and ideology as well when we, for instance, encourage students to question habits built around privilege or difference.

We also often urge students to make writing itself a habit—to schedule specific times during the week to work on writing projects, to find the best location to get writing done, or to consciously decide to visit the writing center on a routine basis. And while increasing individual productivity or accomplishment is a common theme of many self-help genres focused on changing habits, Chun's interest in habits is less about individual choices than about patterns of habit embraced by

communities. In a networked world, it becomes less important that a single user makes a choice than that users in general make that choice. And these habits "link not only humans to other humans, but also humans to non-humans and the environment" (Chun 7). For example, one person leaving food out at a campground is not a significant event, but the habit of people not storing food correctly at campgrounds is an important factor in the habit of bears in the southeastern U.S. entering campgrounds in search of food, a habit that directly influences the design of dumpsters, the rules at campgrounds, the sale of targeted products (i.e., "bear bags"), and the actions of other campers. While we may exhort students to focus on their individual habits, communities have habits as well embodied in their shared practices and events.

Due to the pandemic, some of the habits developed over years of in-person conferences were no longer able to be practiced at the 2021 or 2022 conferences. Practices as simple as sharing a meal with colleagues, visiting local landmarks, or distributing swag or free coffee simply disappeared. By mid-2021, things that were novel during the first online SWCA conference had become habitual and commonplace. Having group sessions on Zoom, participating in virtual workshops, and even zoning-out and multitasking with one's camera and microphone off during a meeting became part of our daily practices. Experiences that may have once generated some excitement or anxiety when first adopted may have become dull after many instances. During the first online conference in 2021, for instance, there were 22 digital posters presented by 35 people, up from only 3 posters presented at the previous year's face-to-face (f2f) conference by only 4 people. In 2022, however, the number of digital posters dropped to only 6 posters, with 17 people involved. Perhaps this supports Chun's claim that "New media exist at the bleeding edge of obsolescence. . . . exciting when they are demonstrated, boring by the time they arrive" (1).

While some practices may rise and fall in popularity quickly, other habits may be harder to unlearn or to convince people to change post-pandemic. Writing centers, for instance, may have difficulty convincing clients that f2f meetings are preferable, and students may expect even f2f instructors to make course materials or office hours available online. While we might hope that some habits remain in place, Chun reminds us that "Change, of course, is central to the very notion of habits" as well (8).

And we do not want habits to stay in place once they've outlived their usefulness. While habits may start as the result of purposeful goals, they eventually become "autonomous programs" that favor inflexible stability (Chun 6). While crises certainly have (sometimes severe) downsides, one benefit is the opportunity to revise habits, to "transform a change provoked by the outside into a change generated from the inside" (Chun 9).

Innovation (YO)University

For academics, the pandemic was a time of many types of changes. Course designs and schedules and teaching methods were quickly adapted to online or hybrid formats, rules were adopted to make campuses safer for students and staff, and we all became more aware of the diverse situations and needs of others. Writing center operations were adjusted at many schools as well, with some centers moving to fully virtual formats and others putting policies in place to protect consultants and clients meeting f2f. At NSU, our center went fully virtual starting in March of 2020, and almost all courses were converted to a "hyflex" format, allowing students and faculty to flexibly move from being in person or virtual from day to day as needed to accommodate social distancing and quarantining requirements. Chun observes that such systemic change has become closely tied to the experience of "crisis," and develops the formula "Habit + Crisis = Update" to describe the typical way in which communities (are forced to) embrace significant change. The pandemic thus represented an opportunity to embrace change at all levels of our institutions and professional organizations.

Embracing change has always been something that NSU takes pride in, with "innovation" being one of our 8 "core values" intended to encourage new applications of our teaching, research, and service to address needs in the community. And the digital means to connect with others and deliver services has long been built into NSU programs, ranging from fully online coursework to tele-surgery to the personalized welcome videos accepted students receive. Even before the pandemic, graduate students in NSU's M.A. in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media (CRDM) program (which includes courses such as "Teaching Writing Online" and "Social Media Writing and Strategy") had been helping run SWCA's social media accounts. And Eric Mason, beyond his role as

SWCA's DCD, had been teaching courses such as "Web, Mobile, and Interactive Design," and collaborating with campus groups to build innovative virtual interfaces and exhibits (some of which are visible at https://scmaker.site).

Even the physical space the WCC inhabits is a reminder of our focus on innovation. The NSU WCC sits on the fourth floor of our university library (both a private and public library), just one floor below the Alan B. Levan | NSU Broward Center of Innovation, a public-private partnership between NSU and Broward County focused on supporting economic and educational innovation in South Florida. If, as Chun argues, modern communication ecosystems are marked by the blurring of the private and the public in the name of innovation and (digital) connectivity, then the very space in which our center exists serves as testament to this habit. All of this is just to say that NSU, a private not-for-profit university, and the WCC itself, were well-positioned to respond to the crisis initiated by the pandemic, and our willingness to host an online SWCA conference was just part of a long commitment to innovation and working with digital media.

Both years of SWCA online conferences produced specific innovations designed to enhance the virtual experience and respond to the current moment. The move toward keynote addresses given by groups made up of faculty and students was one such change that made the experiences and concerns of a diverse group of consultants more prominent at the conference. The display and discussion of digital poster presentations (delivered as pre-recorded video, audio, and interactive Thinglink visuals) was an innovation that brought new genres to the forefront. The 2021 conference was the site of SWCA's first online game night, hosted in Discord by students in NSU's M.A. in CRDM program. The Discord game night provided an innovative opportunity for remote conference attendees to socialize and have some fun together in a less formal setting than a Zoom meeting. But the Discord game night was a synchronous event that only lasted for a short while on one night of the conference. For the 2022 online conference, we decided to create an event lasting throughout the conference using an app called Goose Chase which allowed participants to compete in an interactive multimodal game by uploading text, images, and video to complete over 50 "missions" that encouraged them to share media and information that allowed us to learn

about the people, the centers, and the locations that comprise the SWCA. These missions presented a mixture of fun, creative, and earnest tasks ranging from asking participants to share a picture of their centers' entrances, to looking up historical information about the SWCA, to recording their favorite dance moves, to reflecting on their center's accomplishments and challenges in the preceding year.

Goose Chase satisfied our desire to provide a way for conference attendees to experience the kind of informal sharing that would naturally happen at an in-person conference, while also encouraging them to reflect on the conference experience itself, and the present and future of their centers. The sharing of various media emphasized the contributions of individuals, but some centers chose to participate collectively instead. As Chun writes, "New media are N(YOU) media," that create individual profiles by tracking our actions through networked spaces (3). But "YOU is both singular and plural" (4), encouraging us to simultaneously reveal ourselves as individuals and as fellow members of "particular expressive communities and systems of meaning" (123). The Goose Chase game collected hundreds of voluntary submissions from SWCA members that created a shared sense of a community made up of individuals with personal interests and histories, but individuals also engaged in a collective endeavor, representing both themselves and their centers in thoughtful and creative ways throughout the conference. In our view, this update didn't merely provide stability in the face of limited opportunities or means, as many changes had accomplished, but was an innovation that recaptured some of the community spirit that is spread via the informal interactions common to f2f conferences. Updating the conference game experience to enhance this sense of community felt to us like a natural progression toward re-shaping this community, as opposed to the first online conference, when innovations felt more focused on alleviating anxiety and identifying practical solutions to challenges being faced for the first time.

Updating to Remain the SWCA

The mission statement of the SWCA states that it hopes to "serve as a forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals from both academic and nonacademic communities in the southeastern region of the United States. . . . [including] North Carolina,

South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Puerto Rico, and the American Virgin Islands" ("About SWCA"). Certainly, one of the primary ways it does this is by bringing individuals from across this region together at its annual conference to have conversations about the practice of writing and the delivery of writing center services. Hosting conferences online in 2021 and 2022 allowed the SWCA to continue to accomplish this mission amidst an unprecedented period of crisis. In Chun's formula, "Habit + Crisis = Update," but the resulting changes are not necessarily designed to alter the organization in substantive ways, but, rather, allow it to persist in something close to its earlier shape despite obstacles presented in the form of crises. As she writes, "We are forever trying to catch up, updating to remain (close to) the same; bored, overwhelmed, and anxious all at once" as we try to meet the demands of the present moment (1). So, what changes occurred that were not focused on innovation, but intended to help the SWCA remain the SWCA?

We believe identifying the habits of SWCA attendees that remained the same at the two online conferences is worth asking and requires looking at patterns of choices made by conference participants. One habit of SWCA attendees that we thought might be worth looking into is the habit of presenting collaboratively. We looked at programs from the last four SWCA conferences (2019-2022)—two f2f conferences and two online conferences—to see what our conference presentations revealed about our practices of collaboration (see this article's appendix for access to the data discussed below). Collaboration is a value embedded in the writing center experience in several ways, not the least of which is in the consultation itself. It was unsurprising, then, to learn that collaborative sessions (where a presentation was attributed to more than one person in the conference program) outnumbered individual sessions at all four conferences. In other words, collaboration is an SWCA habit that existed before the pandemic started, and which was sustained during our move to conducting conferences online.

So, did the pandemic impact this practice of collaboration? Across the last four SWCA conferences, there was a small increase in the percentage of presentations that were collaborative, even as the number of presentations declined each year. (We should note, however, that between 2020 and 2021, even as the total number of presentations

decreased, the total number of presenters involved increased, so the number of presentations is not necessarily a good measure of the degree to which people are embracing the habit of working together; more collaboration may equal fewer overall presentations, so averages or percentages may be more telling in some cases.)

A few key statistics did stand out during our review of the data when comparing the two f2f conferences to the two online ones:

- The percentage of collaborative sessions that were delivered by only two people (as opposed to being delivered by 3 or more people) dropped from 47.2% to 36.7%.
- The average number of individuals involved per collaborative session increased significantly from 3 to 3.7.
- While the total number of workshops dropped from 32 in the f2f conferences to 17 in the online ones, the total number of roundtables increased from 18 in the f2f conferences to 40 in the online ones.

These data points suggest to us that during the pandemic we continued to seek ways to collaborate and were involving more people in those collaborations. At the online SWCA conferences, the lower registration costs and the flexibility of online attendance may have also made it easier to secure potential collaborators at the proposal stage leading to these larger presentation groups. The preference for roundtables over workshops also seems noteworthy. This suggests that having experienced the complexities and limitations of Zoom meetings as teachers and colleagues, we collectively decided that they were not the ideal tool for interactive workshops, and that Zoom lent itself more to conversation. (It may also be true that one of the effects of the ongoing pandemic was simply a desire for the space and time to talk with others about the work we do.) The pandemic was a shared experience of crisis that initiated a collective update of our habits, expressed in what Chun calls our "productive nonconscious" that reveals itself through acts in "seemingly spontaneous harmony" with like-minded colleagues (7). Our individual choices to invest more heavily in collaboration speak to who the SWCA was and continues to be.

Conclusion: Re-Shaping the SWCA Community

As we plan for future f2f SWCA conferences, it will be instructive to see how we begin to re-shape our community/communities yet again, perhaps by bringing back previously abandoned habits, or by creating new in-person conference habits. One expectation of an f2f SWCA conference has long been that it will draw heavily from the immediate surrounding area—when participants can drive to the conference in only a few hours and save money on flights, a center can often bring more peer consultants or staff. Just prior to the pandemic, the SWCA achieved a goal set in the early 2010s to host a conference in each of the nine affiliated states without a single repeat, which meant hosting a full conference in Mississippi for the first time in the organization's 35+ year history and a full conference in Virginia for the first time in 25 years. Intentionally hosting the conference in different locations can be a valuable organizational habit as it may encourage different people to experience the event in person (due to the lower cost and less time away from work and family associated with geographic proximity). Shifting conference locations also allows regular attendees to see each other in new places, and more importantly, to meet and collaborate with new colleagues from around the region. Purposeful practices designed to enable a wider variety of SWCA members from different states to attend the conference thus help the organization to constantly re-shape its community by getting new people involved.

At the 2023 SWCA conference, we look forward to being in person and striking up unplanned conversations with colleagues in hallways between sessions, at podiums after presentations or conference tables after workshops, in hotel lobbies throughout the day, and at local restaurants and cafes. This is an enjoyable experience for many participants and a major reason why many participants want to attend in person. Attending presentations, roundtables, and workshops in person also requires people being present in the moment, which may lead us to participating more fully (or at least make us feel like we are). These informal conversations, even if they are semi-planned (e.g., intentionally attending a presentation in order to speak with the presenter for a few moments after it is finished), have been much less common during the last two online conferences, primarily because there has been less time

for carrying on conversations as a session ends and less common "space" in which participants could interact.

While a smaller group of people may have the opportunity to get to know one another better at an in-person conference, the online conference affords the opportunity to attend the event to a potentially larger group. Between the elimination of travel time, the savings from not needing to pay travel costs such as gas, car rental, or hotel, and the ease with which remote participants can log in and out of sessions while sitting at a computer at work, a local coffee shop, or at home, professional organizations may need to justify the value that in-person conferences offer to attendees, and perhaps rethink how these experiences can be made more engaging, inviting, and productive. Thus, the crisis begins to take shape: do we want conferences where fewer people have a deeper or more spontaneous experience, or conferences where more people have a simpler or more direct experience? Can we design online conferences and spaces that serve the diverse needs of writing center practitioners while providing the informal and formal experiences necessary for community to thrive? Or should we focus our energies on making it easier for more people to attend physical locations to have these experiences? No matter how we answer these questions, it will certainly be time for an update.

Works Cited

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Appendix: 2019-2022 SWCA Conference Presentation Data

The following data were drawn from the pdf conference programs published by the SWCA on its conference archives page: https://southeasternwritingcenter.org/conference-archives. These programs should be relatively accurate records of presentations delivered, but there may be some cases where presentations changed between the printing of these programs and the actual conference. Regardless, we believe they are a good source of information about participants' intentions to collaborate.

	Conference Year			
	2019	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**
Conference Modality	face-to-face	face-to-face	online	online
Total # of Presenters	300	245	268	225
Total # of Presentations	136	117	101	88
Average # of Presenters across All Sessions	2.21	2.09	2.65	2.57
Average # of Presenters across All Collaborative Sessions	3.14	2.93	3.59	3.86
# of Solo Presentations	60	51	44	35
# of Collaborative Presentations	76	66	57	53
% of Collaborative Sessions	55.88	56.41	56.44	60.23
% of Collaborative Sessions with More Than 2 Presenters	56.58	48.48	66.66	59.62
# of Poster Sessions	7	3	22	6
# of Panel Presentations*	100	95	54	51
# of Workshops	20	12	8	9
# of Roundtables	10	8	18	22

* Panels assembled by conference organizers out of multiple unique presentations were counted as separate presentations, not as a single collaborative presentation.

Contributor Bios

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