

3000 at 4Cs in 2000: A Wealth of Insights from the World of College Writing

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The lights stayed on (even for the occasional presenter with overheads). The audiences were engagingly small (typically only about 15 rapt attendees).

The language was painstakingly, lovingly crafted (unlike the rambling comments that often string together slides at medical or scientific meetings).

In a distinct change of pace from my richly graphic world of surgical slide presentations, how refreshing it was to NOT be in the dark, to NOT be seated amid throngs of nodding-off residents, to NOT be inundated with a loosely narrated succession of towering bar graphs, grisly operative incisions, boldfaced study objectives, cluttered statistical charts, neatly bulleted conclusions, ad nauseam. (That precise and colorful world, of course, has its wondrous place, and I do relish and deeply respect it; still, it was fun to be immersed in pure humble academe again, no PowerPoint software or laser pointers in sight, at least for a few days.)

In short, it was just plain exhilarating to be presenting at and participating in the 51st annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (dubbed 4Cs), a division of the National Council of Teachers of English. This heady academic conference—which drew 3000 registrants, mostly university writing professors, from around the United States and beyond—featured nearly 500 concurrent scholarly panels, roundtables, and special-interest meetings. It was held 12-15 April 2000 at the sprawling convention center in the vibrant City of Lakes, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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Over the conference's 3-plus jam-packed days, the many sessions that I attended—each 75 minutes long, each showcasing two to four presenters—were all quite stimulating and substantive. The flavor of the numerous medically and scientifically oriented sessions seeps through in their eclectic titles, among them “The Rhetoric of the Human Genome Project: The Disabled Body as Textual Irregularity”, “Historical Perspectives on Medical Rhetoric: Reimagining Healthcare Communication”, “Rhetoric of Disability: Sharing Memoirs of Language Differences”, “The Image of Health: Nineteenth-Century Medical Photography”, “Service Learning in an Urban Nature Course”, “Educating the Imagination: Einstein's Mode of Creative Thought”, “Your Request for Treatment Has Been Denied, or, Tough Lessons about Literacy from a Managed Care Plan”, “Developing a Culture of Writing in the Sciences”, “Solving for x: A New Equation for Science and Writing”, “Writing Pharmaceutical Care: (Dis) Similarity in Writing Tasks Performed by Doctor of Pharmacy Students and Their Clinical Preceptors”, “The Nature of Content: Science Writing in the Composition Classroom”, and “Can I Quote You on This? Patient Testimonials and the Rhetoric of Qualitative Medical Research”. (As an official member of the Medical Rhetorics panel, I was thrilled to be able to enter this swirling interdisciplinary conversation formally with a paper of my own, “Lexical and Syntactic Objectification of Patients in Medical Journals”.)

One lesson that I wish the 4Cs planners could appropriate from equally intense yet more sanely scheduled conferences like those orchestrated by CSE and the American Medical Writers Association: Give attendees a break, at least for lunch! With only 15 to 30 fleeting minutes between sessions, even over the noon

hour, the routine was frenetic: ferret out the washroom with the shortest line, grab a hot dog and a paper cup of pop, and sprint down the (always other) hallway in time for the next paper. Maybe all those comp-teacher types (and I, sigh, was proud to be one of them for 5 years as a TA in grad school) just can't relax any more, too harried by the specter of stacks of themes waiting at home to be corrected. Or maybe those of us now in the “real” world, beyond the front lines of academe, have become spoiled by our generally bigger professional-development budgets.

For me the most rejuvenating event of the entire conference was the warm, informal meeting one evening of the 5-year-old Medical Rhetoricians special-interest group. About 20 of us seized the chance and took the time to sit in a circle, introduce ourselves, and savor one another's unique backgrounds and common intellectual bonds. (If only some caterer had appeared with steaming trays of food, it would have been nirvana!) We plan to continue discussing medical writing and editing issues in an enlivened listserv.

The common denominator at 4Cs for most in attendance is the college writing classroom—rather than the laboratory or clinic or office suite. Yet fieldwork encompassed such diverse sites as coal mines, insurance companies, and medical-photography studios. Various historical figures were quoted and assessed, such as clergyman Cotton Mather (the Colonial smallpox-inoculation advocate who wrote America's first medical compendium) and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (the English smallpox-vaccination advocate whose letters provide fascinating glimpses into patient-physician communication). Myriad literary texts were alluded to, excerpted, and analyzed, such as Michel Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Reynolds Price's *A Whole New Life*, Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, Margaret Edson's *Wit: A*

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Play, C P Snow's *Two Cultures*, William Carlos Williams's poems, and Annie Dillard's essays.

The esoteric quirky terminology of composition and rhetoric abounded: trope, subgenre, autopathography, metacognition, ontological metaphor, discursive boundaries, triangulate, multivocalism, unpacking the cultural narrative, the ideologies that write us and write the world, discourse community, institutional interpellation, hegemony, heuristics, ad libitum.

Speakers living with AIDS and breast cancer poignantly shared their personal and professional viewpoints. Colleagues, both long-time and newly met, exchanged war stories and class syllabi and favorite bibliographies and e-mail addresses.

Here's a sampler of memorable take-home messages gleaned from the sessions I was treated to, in particular those most pertinent to science editing:

- Health-care practitioners must pay attention to the feelings of their patients. In her paper on the rhetoric of agency, Jackie Rinaldi of Sacred Heart University quoted some of cancer survivor Reynolds Price's searing metaphors in his autobiographic *A Whole New Life*. To cite just two vivid examples, Price sardonically noted that one of his caregivers had the empathy "of a steel cheese grater" and that he became "a butchered steer" after surgery.
- Nurses must be included in the continuing written discussion in our field of how patients are perceived by science in general and medicine in particular.

This plea was made by an unidentified question-asker in the audience, who lamented the hierarchized focus on the discourse practices of physicians but not of their lesser-paid colleagues who might well have more (albeit not necessarily kinder) contact with patients.

- A famous illustration of one of Napoleon's disastrous campaigns in which the number of human lives lost is represented by varied widths of a roughly horizontal bar was derided as unethical and dehumanizing by Sam Dragga of Texas Tech University. He warned all of us who work with charts and other graphic devices to beware such crass legends as "distribution of fatal events". His talk's title was "Cruel Pies: The Inhumanity of Technical Illustrations".
- Writers in the sciences need to "do more than write it down" just as writers in the liberal arts need to "do more than write it out", according to Debrah Huffman of the University of Missouri. She emphasized that professors in the sciences must recognize that they are "not preparing careers, but rather students".
- Headings and subheadings serve a crucial dual purpose, helping the author to generate more organized expository prose and helping the reader to navigate a research article more efficiently—but perhaps at the expense of the traditional transitional sentence. So said Timothy Alan Gustafson of the University of Minnesota, who teaches engineering students to use well-placed headings and subheadings to structure their main

points and get "unstuck" when their draft isn't going anywhere.

- We need "to provide a more inclusive definition of Science outside the limits of 'science as empiricism', as it is often understood today", per one of the goals expressed on a lesson plan handed out by Lammert Holdijk of the American University in Cairo.
- "The conventions of discourse in science and technology may exclude knowledge critical to effective risk management and assessment." That was one of seven working assumptions shared by Bev Sauer of Carnegie Mellon University, who studied transcripts of miners' testimony about methane concentrations and other safety factors after the 1993 Southmountain disaster.
- The first example of a book using the heliotype reproduction process was Charles Darwin's less well-known *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals with Photographic and Other Illustrations*, published in 1872—one of many compelling tidbits dispensed by Gregory Wickliff of the University of North Carolina.

True to program chair Wendy Bishop's exhortation in the (328-page!) conference handbook and schedule, I was fully able to "take some newly generated energy back" to my workplace, and I enthusiastically intend to "make good use of" the conference's insights and contacts "long after it has ended." I suspect that 2999 fellow participants feel the same way. 🌱