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What's New at 4C20: An Interview with the Organizers

2/24/2020

By Dr. Lucy Johnson

I had the opportunity to sit down with this year's conference chair, [Julie Lindquist](#), and her research assistant, [Bree Gannon](#) via Skype to learn about what's new this year at 4C20. Our focus was not only to inform new attendees of the conference about all the wonderful opportunities for networking, community building, and professionalizing, but also to specifically highlight what makes this year unique.

In reflecting on past iterations of the conference, what sets this year apart from others?

Julie: I think there are several things that we're hoping to carry forward from prior years, but there are a few things that make MKE 2020 distinctive. One is the emphasis on the conference as an experience and an event oriented to attendees as learners. We're seeing the conference as a space where folks have several opportunities for new learning, not exclusive to panels—that is, intentionally designed places of and occasions for conversation, connection, and reflection.

How can the conference be an experience that cannot be had other ways? What experience does the conference offer that might not be available in other times and places?

Julie: We think a conference makes a provisional community for people that may not exist in other spaces. It gets people out of their local contexts, and it builds relationships across disciplines, geographical locations, and communities. More than anything, it really embodies the professional community in ways that can't be replicated.

Bree: As a PhD student, it's always interesting for me to remember that a lot of people work in isolation. Conferences are an opportunity to connect with others in ways that might not be available to people locally. It also gives people the chance to discover how the field is changing and transforming. We read articles and books, but conferences give us the opportunity to experience the work of others in more intimate and embodied ways.

In cultivating that sense of community for conference attendees, what are the spaces at 4C20 for people to connect and develop new relationships?

Julie: When we were planning the conference, we began asking questions at our own institution like, "What do you expect from a conference?" and "what do you hope to get out of attending a conference?" The thing that kept surfacing was the accidental conversations that manifest. We began thinking about how we might make those "elevator conversations" more intentional in the design of the conference itself. One thing we developed is called Common Grounds coffee houses, which are pop up coffee stations that are set up at various times and places throughout

the conference. You can go in and get a cup of coffee and it costs you the price of a conversation. In other words, it's not coffee to go, it's coffee to stay. It's a place and space to have these organic conversations.

Another element that is still in the planning phase are the Think Mobs, which are on- and off-site opportunities for conversation. We want to provide an experience where people have a place to meet others and connect. The Friday night event is also very exciting this year. In the past, it's most often been a band in a ballroom. This year, we're really striving to embody the summer festival vibe that Milwaukee is so famous for, so we'll have food trucks lined up just outside of the Wisconsin Center Atrium. Inside, there's going to be a local music act called [SistaStrings](#), spoken word poetry by Milwaukee poet laureate [Dasha Hamilton](#), cash bars, and games.

Bree: We've also developed Documentarian roles for this year's conference. The Documentarian role seeks to capture how people connect with one another and with the experience of the conference itself. Documentarians are charged with capturing those moments of connection, experience, and movement, and documenting them so that these stories are available to the wider 4C20 community. We hope to surface and listen to those stories and perspectives that are sometimes overlooked or unheard.

How have you worked with the Local Arrangements Committee (LAC) to ensure that the conference is about Milwaukee?

Julie: We've worked very closely with the LAC chair, Maria Novotny, and her team. The LAC, in turn, has worked in collaboration with SJAC, the Social Justice Action Committee. Maria has been organizing with local community members to plan experiences like narrated bus tours of the North and South Side communities, which will provide a more embodied experience of local stories. Our close collaboration with the LAC has been motivated by the goal of creating a more situated conference experience within Milwaukee, so that we're all encouraged to recognize the place we are in and attend to its history.

Bree: We both read the book [Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City](#) by Matthew Desmond, which is based in Milwaukee, and we became really passionate about incorporating that text into some of the conversations at the conference. For example, SJAC put together an activist panel that engages the stories and issues the book describes. For us, the story told in *Evicted* became a sort of central component to weaving Milwaukee and its history into the conference.

Another thing we're working with the LAC on is the land/water acknowledgements. At the conference, there's going to be a table set up for people who want to learn more about land/water acknowledgements and how to incorporate them into their teaching, presentations, and academic identities in a way that honors the indigenous communities, land/water, and histories. Maria has been a central figure in working with the American Indian Caucus and working with local indigenous communities to offer Native vendors and exhibits at the

conference.

We've talked a lot about community building for conference attendees. On the other end, how has the planning of this conference been a collaborative experience?

Julie: The planning has truly been a collaborative experience since the beginning. From the CFP to the vision to the execution, we've been working together every step of the way, seeing the conference experience as a pedagogical space, and working towards ways to express that vision. I serve as Bree's research mentor, and we have worked together in many other capacities, so a lot of the things we believe as teachers and administrators are showing up in the planning of this conference. These explicitly collaborative experiences, and also the everyday moments in our lives as teachers and scholars, have shaped the planning process for us.

Bree: One of the things we wanted to do this year as part of the reflective process was create a zine-style planner for conference participants. This zine is a creative journal with an artistic element to it. We collaborated with designer and academic [Lauren Brentnell](#) on the creation of this zine. It has many reflection sections to allow a space for attendees to reflect and record their experiences and takeaways. We're excited about the zine being a collaborative experience for attendees across the conference.

We realized early on that Julie and I are just one perspective, both from MSU, and so we brought in other perspectives. We've been collaborating with stakeholders such as Maria, Michael Pemberton of the SJAC, and members of NCTE. We've also learned a lot from the work of those who have done the conference planning before us.

On that note, how does the conference participate in an ongoing narrative? What has it carried forward from prior years, and what likely to be carried forward into 2021?

Julie and Bree: There are a lot of conference events and experiences that are ongoing. Even with all the things that are new, we've still tried to maintain and honor the work that past chairs—Vershawn, Asao, and Caroline, most recently—have done. In recent years, there's been a lot of concern about social justice and diversity, inclusion, and what it means to have access. These are important goals of the conference, and we think what we're doing is not anything radically different but rather continuing this focus and work in new ways. Holly Hassel, the incoming chair, has expressed that she'd like to carry forward the Documentarian idea, so that may become a component of the conference that will continue to carry momentum in the years to come. In many ways, it feels like there has been, and will be, an ongoing story for the conference.

In thinking about all that's going into the conference planning, what have you learned—about the conference itself, and about the wider profession—through conceiving and planning a conference? What has been most surprising?

Bree: I've been going to 4Cs throughout my time as a student presenting my work. However, I don't think I really understood the conference until I began this role as a research assistant. Prior to my work with 4C20, I had imagined that some kind of inaccessible executive board of people made these decisions behind closed doors. However, the people who are involved are just that—people. All of this work is service-driven. People are volunteering their time and labor, and I've learned that you can play an influential role in the conference in a way I didn't realize until now.

Julie: There's a lot of goodwill behind this conference—and the organization itself—that people don't always get to see. Like Bree, I also found this experience to be supportive and communal, but I think there are ways we can work in the future to make this planning a bit more transparent to the larger 4C20 community. This shouldn't be an invisible process, and both of us had the experience of not knowing much about the process until we were in it. We're hoping the work of the Documentarians can showcase some of that “behind the scenes” collaboration that is vital to the success of the conference.

Dr. Lucy Johnson is an assistant professor of digital literacies at UW-Eau Claire, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, technology, and culture. Her research examines ethical communication design and human-centered (as opposed to machine-based) digital literacy initiatives and outcomes within higher ed.