
Conference-Session Moderation: Guidelines for Supporting a Culture of Access

Compiled by

Caitlin Burns Allen

Stephanie Kerschbaum



Caitlin Burns Allen is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville, where she served as an assistant director of the Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition. She received her MA in Composition, Rhetoric, and English Studies from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her research and teaching interests include the rhetoric of health and medicine, feminist methodologies, digital rhetorics, and archival research. She guest-edited a special issue of *Across the Disciplines* (with Gesa E. Kirsch, Romeo García, and Walker Smith). Her work has appeared in *Ethics and Representation in Feminist Rhetorical Inquiry* and *Peitho*.



Stephanie Kerschbaum is associate professor of English and director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Washington. Dr. Kerschbaum draws upon her experience as a deaf academic for her teaching and scholarship. Her research interests include diversity issues, disability studies, and the teaching of writing. She is the author of *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, which won the 2015 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award, and with Laura T. Eisenman and James M. Jones, she coedited *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education*. Her second monograph, [Signs of Disability](#), will be published in late 2022 with New York University Press.

Access in conference spaces is crucial. More than ten years ago, Margaret Price (2009) noted that, notwithstanding how essential conferences are for many academics, they “are often among the least accessible spaces that people with disabilities encounter in the course of our work.” While conferences have taken on new forms and configurations in the early 2020s, conference inaccessibility remains a significant challenge shaped by multiple factors.

In a recent symposium aimed at expanding conference accessibility, Ada Hubrig and Ruth D. Osorio (2020) learned from and extended disability justice principles created by disabled people of color to forward a definition of access as “the dynamic, collective movement of creating spaces where multipl[y] marginalized disabled people with a wide range of needs can engage in whatever manners they choose” (p. 91). Working from the definition of access Hubrig and Osorio unpack, in this essay we consider the role conference-session moderators play in supporting conference

Abstract

In this essay, we consider the role conference-session moderators can play in supporting conference accessibility, drawing on our experiences with conference moderation at the 2021 Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition. Rather than offering a checklist of access moves, we offer guidelines and recommendations conference-session moderators can adapt and implement in their individual contexts, recognizing access is always situated in specific places, times, and spaces that lead to particular enactments of conference-session moderation. Our goal is for this piece to serve as a starting point for other conference organizers working to cultivate intersectional forms of access and accessibility.

Keywords

conference moderator, access, accessibility, culture of access, conference moderation, virtual conference

accessibility. Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia Selfe, and Remi Yergeau (2014) describe “a culture of access” as “a culture of participation and redesign” (p.153). Understanding access through participation and redesign points to the work session moderators do in influencing how presenters, attendees, and others sharing physical and/or virtual conference space move together. This work involves interaction with material artifacts and environments, as well as the creation and maintenance of social arrangements. Such moves also necessitate attention to what disability theorist Aimi Hamraie (2017) describes as a politics of knowing that insists we ask whose perspectives, knowledges, ways of moving, and practices are recognized and made legible, as well as what is consequently ignored and treated as illegible.

In the remainder of this essay we situate the enactment of conference moderation at the 2021 Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition. This context is necessary to share because access is always situated in specific places, times, and spaces that lead to particular enactments of conference-session moderation. We do not offer a checklist for conference-session moderation in general; such a checklist would inevitably fail (see Dolmage, 2015; Wood et al., 2014) and could never be applied to all potential conference spaces. Instead, we hope this might be a starting point for other conference organizers working to cultivate intersectional forms of access and accessibility, emphasizing, as Jay Dolmage and others do, the importance of continually learning and working toward accessibility rather than orienting to it as an achievement or an arrival.

THE 2021 WATSON CONFERENCE

Our recommendations and guidelines are rooted in our experiences during the 2021 Watson Conference, for which Caitlin served as an assistant director and Stephanie served as a panel moderator. The conference was held fully online over the course of three days in April during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference’s theme, “Toward the Antiracist Conference: Reckoning with the Past, Reimagining the Present,” emerged through commitments to recognizing and grappling with the conference’s history of anti-Black racism. The 2021 conference director, Andrea Olinger, noted in [a statement about the conference’s history](#) that the conference and the “very institutions that host Watson and enable it” are “saturated in whiteness.” This “saturation in whiteness” makes some bodies and their needs legible while ignoring others, as Hamraie (2017) pushes us to recognize. It further necessitated that the 2021 Watson conference organizers and those involved in making it happen engage the conference’s history and actively work to transform its material spaces and social structures. The guidelines we share below were developed and implemented within this specific context and further revised for this special issue with generous and generative feedback from external reviewers.

Our goal in sharing these practices is to provide one example of how we worked towards a “culture of access” at one virtual conference. While virtual contexts can improve accessibility for some, an online conference setting is not always automatically more accessible. Consequently, creating a culture of access requires careful planning, attention, and reflection on the part of all organizers and moderators. Many of the guidelines below reflect the [Watson Conference Commitments](#), a list of commitments organizers and participants were invited to support in order to “create a different kind of conference environment.” Each of the commitments worked to create an inclusive environment in some way, but two are especially pertinent to these moderator guidelines. First, Watson participants were asked to commit to this statement: “We will co-create a culture of access while recognizing that this work is never complete.” These moderation guidelines are rooted in and evolved from part of our efforts to uphold this commitment as organizers and to remind presenters and attendees to foreground access as well. Second, organizers asked participants to commit to the following statement: “We will actively attend to power dynamics in participation—and we will name and interrupt these dynamics as needed.” During conference sessions—and especially during Q&As—moderators often have the most immediate opportunity to attend to power dynamics and intervene when there is a need.

We developed the following guidelines in response to the specific context of the 2021 Watson Conference, but future conferences and workshops will require that they be adapted to meet the needs of those settings. Hubrig and Osorio (2020) ask us to consider how our conferences might “transform if all organizers, volunteers, and participants approached access as an ongoing, recursive movement that, while never perfect, moves our communities toward belonging” (p. 92). Recognizing access as ongoing and recursive, we recommend tailoring these guidelines to each different context and conference. Every context requires reflection from conference organizers and moderators so they can adapt to their specific space and modality; different spaces and technologies allow and create different configurations and possibilities for access.

MODERATION GUIDELINES

The guidelines below are largely drawn from Stephanie’s email communication with presenters on the two panels she moderated in the weeks before the Watson conference. Her work in writing these recommendations emerged from years of participating in and observing these and other access moves in disability-centric spaces, as well as through collaboration and connection with others doing this work in a wide range of academic spaces. The conference’s virtual setting meant presentations were given online, using Zoom’s meeting format. As mentioned before, many of the guidelines in our list can be adapted to fit an in-person conference setting, but they were originally drafted with our specific virtual conference in mind. These guidelines, which we have compiled and expanded from materials shared at the Watson conference,

are separated into three groups, based on the different stages of events—beginning with conversations for moderators to have with presenters in the weeks or days before an event, then moving to responsibilities immediately before and during a session, and concluding with considerations for Q&A.

Pre-event Conversations and Recommendations

- Remind presenters they should plan to visually describe any images or materials on their slides.
- Ask presenters to spell any names or technical terms important to the talk (e.g., “as Stephanie Kerschbaum K E R S C H B A U M has written...”). This helps the ASL interpreters fingerspell and helps listeners anchor onto a name. In addition, ask presenters to ensure authors’ names are pronounced accurately. These practices not only help make the space more inclusive, given that many non-Western and/or nonwhitestream authors may regularly experience having their names mispronounced. Ensuring accurate pronunciation can additionally make it easier for attendees to locate an author’s work after the presentation.
- If a presenter is citing or including a lot of citations, encourage them to write those citations into the prose since it is difficult to read aloud a string of names.
- Suggest presenters practice the pace of their speaking, including practicing taking deep breaths periodically between slides. (We sometimes find it helpful to write reminders about pacing, such as “take breath” or “slow down,” right into the script).
- Open a discussion about session framing among the moderator and presenters. For instance, what role might/land acknowledgements play in the session? Responses to this question will vary according to the context of the event or panel and the responsibilities, commitments, positionalities, and locations of the presenters and moderator. Other framing conversations might take up questions about what access moves or elements the moderator and presenters will build into the event space, deciding if/how presenters will describe or introduce themselves and/or giving attention to the needs or expectations people with different embodied experiences might bring to the event.
- Give presenters an opportunity to let moderators know what has worked well for them in past presentations and Q&As that they would like the moderator to consider, verbalize, or incorporate into their moderation.
- Create space for presenters to share any other suggestions, notes, or requests.

Moderator Responsibilities before and during Presentations

- Confirm the pronunciation of presenters’ names and institutions.
- Confirm presenters’ pronouns and preferences about how they would like to be referred to.

- Collect and share links to access copies, scripts, slides, and other materials with attendees (through the chat in a Zoom meeting, for example).
- Keep time, and send or give presenters appropriate reminders (such as five minutes left and two minutes left). In a virtual space, this can be done through the private chat feature, raising a hand, or another agreed-upon signal. Consider reminding presenters again if their presentations expand beyond the allotted time unless it’s clear the presenter is very close to the end of their scripted remarks.
- Explicitly invite attention to the intersectional dimensions of access shaped through framing and enactment of a conference session. Moderators might do so by offering a land acknowledgement (see, e.g., Duwamish Tribe, “[How to Make a Land Acknowledgement](#)”; “[Where We Stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta Treaty Lands](#)” [Čhaŋtémaza & McKay 2020]) and/or Black Body Acknowledgement (Young, this special issue) based on pre-event conversations, opening opportunities for presenters and attendees to move their bodies or adjust their spaces as needed ([Price, Access Invocation n.d.](#)), or sharing expectations or options for audience interaction or feedback such as applause, cheering, etc.

Moderator Responsibilities during Q&A Sessions

- Recognize there are multiple formats and approaches to a Q&A session, and consider which may be the best fit for your moderation approach, the presenters, and the session context.
- Give the audience a brief reminder of the guidelines for appropriate behavior during Q&A, such as considering one’s positionality and relationship to power before speaking or putting a question into the chat (see [Eve Tuck’s Twitter thread](#) [2019] on Q&A best practices).
- Remind attendees they can cause harm with questions that request access to disabled, BIPOC, and/or multiply marginalized presenters’ traumas or lived experiences.
- Ask that questions go back and forth between presentations rather than having a string of questions focus on just one presentation. When questions are addressed to all presenters, ensure each presenter is given the opportunity to respond.
- Give presenters an opportunity to share how they would prefer to indicate their interest in answering a question if the question doesn’t specifically focus on one presenter (e.g. raising a hand in Zoom, unmuting themselves, etc.).
- Stop screen sharing so people have fewer elements of visual clutter on their screens.
- Let participants know they can raise their hands to speak or be called on, or type their question into the chat for the moderator to read aloud.

- Remind attendees and presenters to share their names before speaking or asking a question (e.g., “This is Caitlin Burns Allen speaking”).
- Actively monitor the chat so presenters don’t have to, and voice aloud questions that come in through the chat, asking appropriate clarification as needed.

We envision these guidelines as a contribution—that is, a “place to start,” as Dolmage (2015) has put it—in ongoing efforts to make academic conference spaces more accessible. As Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau (2014) write, “[A] culture of access is a culture of participation and redesign” (p.153). We anticipate these guidelines continuing to develop, expand, and change to create a stronger culture of access for conference sessions.

Tuck, E. [@tuckeve]. (2019, June 19). *I was just asked by a colleague how I facilitate Q & A sessions—I guess the word is out.* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/tuckeve/status/1141501422611128320>

Watson Conference. (2021). *2021 Watson Conference Commitments.* <https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/2021-watson-conference-commitments>

Wood, T., Dolmage, J., Price, M., & Lewiecki-Wilson, C. (2014, Fall). Moving beyond disability 2.0 in composition studies. *Composition Studies*, 42(2), 147–150.

References

- Brewer, E., Selfe, C. L., & Yergeau, M. R. (2014). Creating a culture of access in composition studies. *Composition Studies*, 42(2), 151–154.
- Čhantémaza (McKay, N.) & McKay, M. S. (2020). Where we stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta treaty lands. *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, 17(Fall), 7–22. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/where-we-stand/>
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2019). *Accessibility guide.* https://cccc.ncte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CCCC2019_AccessibilityGuide.pdf
- Dolmage, J. (2015). Universal design: Places to start. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35(2). <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4632/3946>
- Duwamish Tribe. (n.d). *How to make a land acknowledgement.* <https://www.duwamishtribe.org/land-acknowledgement>
- Global Society of Online Literacy Educators. (n.d.). *Conference guide: Designing for accessibility and inclusion.* https://gsole.org/conference/presenterguide#Tips_for_Presenters
- Hamraie, A. (2017). *Building access: Universal Design and the politics of disability.* University of Minnesota Press.
- Hubrig, A., & Osorio, R. (2020). Symposium: Enacting a culture of access in our conference spaces. *College Composition and Communication*, 72(1), 87–96.
- Olinger, A. (2020, October 12). *Watson and anti-Black racism.* Watson Conference. <https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/watson-and-anti-black-racism>
- Price, M. (2009). Access imagined: The construction of disability in conference policy documents. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29(1), <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/174/174>
- Price, M. *Access invocation.* (n.d.). <https://margaretprice.wordpress.com/access-statement-for-presentations/>
- The Ohio State University. (n.d.). *Composing access project: An invitation to creating accessible events.* <https://u.osu.edu/composingaccess/>