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WWA Reflection: Building Writing Momentum: A Year of Digital Conferences

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Abstract

This reflection, which considers the positive impact of attending online conferences on building writing momentum is in response to the ABO Call for Short Reflections (500-750 words) on Writing and Research during the Pandemic.

Keywords

reflection; conferences; online; writing; momentum

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It was Friday, 13th March 2020, and I was sitting in the British Library working on my laptop after a day of looking at manuscripts. It was only 4 p.m. but the café had already closed; a sign of the bigger changes yet to come. I was more than aware that COVID-19 was already causing concern, though I was yet to be significantly affected other than a few additional meetings with my head of department to map out a contingency plan if my institution moved to a work from home model. I had thought about postponing my trip to the British Library, but with an impending book deadline, I thought I should just put my concerns to one side and make the trip anyway: I am an early career researcher and lecturer based in Scotland and travelling to London is time-consuming and expensive. As I finished up writing notes for the day, an email popped into my inbox from a colleague with the subject line: "Do we need to postpone our conference?" Indeed, by 23rd March, the United Kingdom issued a stay-at-home order, and I knew that any plans I had for the summer, be it organising events, travelling, or writing, needed a radical rethink.

Since March 2020, I have organised two international conferences, both of which have taken place online. The first, the [Spheres of Singing](#) conference, took place between May 28 and 30 2020, and though it had been intended as an in-person conference to be held at the University of Glasgow, the five other organisers and I decided to move the conference online. The decision to move the second conference online, the [BSECS 50th Annual conference](#), which typically takes place in early January as an in-person event at St Hughes College, University of Oxford, was made in July 2020. In both cases, the organising teams realised that many academics could be facing a variety of challenges including increased workload, additional caring responsibilities, unexpected unemployment, and social isolation. It is understandable why some people have chosen to avoid conferences entirely in these new circumstances, but for others (and I include myself in this category) online conferences have been an important opportunity to engage with peers and colleagues from across the globe. Indeed, the attendee numbers at both conferences were particularly high, with 720 people attending the first conference in late May 2020, and 302 attending the second in early January 2021. I would never have expected these numbers at either event had it been in person.

At both of these conferences, we aimed to be open and flexible, especially given the variety of challenges facing academics across the world. Creating shorter days that started in the early afternoon and finished no later than 6 p.m., as well as building in breaks throughout the day, helped to provide more breathing space for delegates who were managing multiple commitments. Obtaining permission from speakers and recording the panels gave delegates who were unable to attend a specific session the opportunity to watch at their convenience. Giving speakers the option of pre-recording their presentation or speaking live allowed those who were anxious about participating alternative options for presenting and gaining feedback from colleagues.

With regards to my own work, prior to COVID-19, I had few plans to attend or contribute to any conferences in 2020 other than the two I had agreed to help organise. I felt between preparation and travelling, I would be wasting too much writing time, especially since I had a hard deadline for my book manuscript. However, as conferences moved online and the expense and time pressures were removed, I was inspired to submit abstracts for conferences that aligned with themes discussed in my book. In 2020, I spoke at four different online events, where I presented a paper based on a particular chapter in my book. I used these events as internal deadlines for specific chapters, which helped me maintain writing momentum. Questions from delegates provided useful feedback, which helped me feel more confident about my work, while also allowing me to identify ambiguities and inconsistencies in my writing.

At the conferences I attended, the organisers had adopted similar strategies as the conferences I organised: the average conference day was shorter with plenty of breaks, panels were recorded, and there was more flexibility about how a speaker could present their work. The kind of pressure I typically feel at an in-person conference – such as attending multiple panels, and a variety of conference activities to maximise networking – was removed by the online environment. While I understand that these activities, particularly networking, are important, I have found the online conference experience much more enjoyable and beneficial as I am able to focus more on my areas of interest and on my work, in part because I can switch off the computer and take time to reflect rather than dashing off to another panel or meet and greet.

Attending a conference online might not be for everyone, but I have found organising and attending online events useful and rewarding. I hope that post-pandemic, some events will remain online or will adopt a blended approach, giving academics more flexibility when it comes to conference attendance and presentation.