



Slow Conferencing: A Recipe for Gathering in Troubled Times

Sue Ruddick

University of Toronto
sue.ruddick@utoronto.ca

Abstract

The international conference comes at a cost in terms of our carbon footprint, but it also comes at a cost in terms of building broad communities of interest - particularly for those located in far flung parts of the globe where air travel is prohibitive, and even those who are relatively close but not living close to an airport hub. How might we think alternative forms of connection in a way that doesn't seem like the poor cousin to the big conference, with its frisson of seeing a new place, reconnecting with old friends, making important employment connections, packing a room of attendees or making that unplanned connection with another academic who is working on parallel tracks? Here I propose two recipes for slow conferencing.

Keywords

Slow conferencing; carbon footprint; infrastructure; air travel

Introduction

The times are urgent, let us slow down – Bayo Akomolafe¹

Following the International Panel on Climate Change report of 2018 it is clear we have very little time to get things right on this planet.

For academics (like myself) this presents a challenging paradox. On the one hand we need intellectual connections, exchanges, and ideas more than ever: to clarify and document our understandings of the problems (in this era of fake news); to think about how and where to act strategically and to build connections and community at a time when things seem most dire. The internet and social media push speedy responses and bifurcate responses into support or opposition; tweets or retweets. They consolidate communities of affect, but not necessarily corresponding communities of action, with all the complexity and considered thought and strategy which those demand, which is perhaps part of their allure.

On the other hand, our preferred method of making intellectual connections – the international gathering (sometimes several in a year) — comes at a cost. It comes at a cost in terms of our carbon footprint, but it also comes at a cost in terms of building broad communities of interest. And at it comes at a financial cost, whether your point of origin is in the global north or global south - particularly for those located in far flung parts of the globe where air travel is prohibitive, and even those who are relatively close but not living close to an airport hub.

The challenge to me – to all of us — is this: how might we think alternative forms of connection in a way that doesn't seem like the poor cousin to the big conference, with its frisson of seeing a new place, reconnecting with old friends, making important employment connections, packing a room of attendees or making that unplanned connection with another academic who is working on parallel tracks? I see this as an opportunity but also a general principle for mobilizing – we need to replace old seductions with new ones, story the things we value differently, reimagine infrastructures. I think in terms of conferencing we are in that moment akin to when people first tried to become vegetarian by removing meat from their plate and keeping the very unappetizing overboiled potatoes and dead broccoli.

We need to reimagine plenty. What it looks like, what it can bring.

With that in mind I want to open a conversation about a different way of conferencing – slow conferencing we might call it. We have the technology. There are organizations that are beginning to do this, to experiment with a range of technological forums to build conversation and community, whether mobilizing around specific issues or providing opportunities blending on-line learning and face-to-face discussion. FemTechNet, for instance (<http://femtechnet.org>) is a

¹ Many thanks to Neera Singh for sharing this aphorism with me.

group which explores the connections between feminism and technology. As a feminist alternative to the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) led by a “star teacher” it has created a platform organized around horizontal and distributed connections in their Distributed Open Collaborative Courses (DOCC), that “operates through a network that uses digital technologies to constellate our pedagogies, to circulate distributed expertise, and to increase teaching and learning resources.” Non-government organizations such as the Dogwood Initiative (<https://dogwoodbc.ca>) and Raven (<https://raventrust.com>) increasingly combine webinars and on the ground mobilizations to connect far-flung groups around regional struggles with global consequences.

Alternative forms of conferencing could learn from and build on these experiments, bringing us a different vision of plenty. What we lack is the imagination.

Imagine you want to convene a series of sessions on the global impacts of mining on local communities. In the AAG model here is what is likely to happen:

- 1) Your session, or series of sessions are scheduled in a parallel track with another session on local communities’ responses to mining disasters running concurrently, alongside a third, on nuclear waste and toxic sovereignty. You end up in a competition for audiences among the very communities of interest that should be connecting with one another.
- 2) Two of your presenters can’t make it because of the travel ban on whoever they are from where ever they are from to wherever you are holding the conference.
- 3) A third presenter has a delayed flight, possibly because the smoke from an erupting volcano or series of wildfires has put a hold on air travel. (Remember Iceland and the 2010 AAG in Washington?)
- 4) The room is hot, it is 8:30 in the morning (on the last day), and the venue is next door to a panel that seems to be playing an overly loud video.

The sessions go well enough in spite of all of this and you leave feeling okay for all the effort you put in and the conversations that ensued. But what if there was a different version to this conference? I am proposing here two recipes for a different kind of conferencing – but these are not the only two. Reflect on them but think about additional ways to reimagine conferences. Experiment.

Recipe One: Time travel while staying in place (stay in your zone)

Instead of travelling from all over everywhere to somewhere, you identify a swath of potential gathering sites – within a four-hour time zone, so let’s say Vancouver, but also places as far flung Rio and Pond Inlet. You can, should you wish, convene an audience in a reasonable time frame that covers practically all of the Western Hemisphere (sorry Alaska and Hawaii...). This takes some time to

build, but a few well-placed enquiries to your network should show where the infrastructure is and where it might need support.

Your gathering is structured as a series of exchanges: Papers are videotaped in advance to reduce technical glitches, people gather in their own local sites to watch the video and then discuss with authors in a live real time Q & A via skype. People record papers or share real time excursions into the field – using smart phones – also a great teaching tool to bring the world into your classroom. You identify infrastructures that support this kind of multi-local gathering – local libraries, universities, community colleges. Travel is local coming by bicycle, car, subway or train to a particular event, and events are webcast for home viewing.

You might organize sessions in a four-hour block of time (12 papers if we use conventional conference format). Or you might experiment with different formats. A one-hour session every week over a month where conversations build and develop. A series of back and forth exchanges where people present ideas one week and panels comment on them the next. You can invite your students, community groups. You can build a learning library from video cast interventions.

You can begin to think about how academic interventions can fuse with thinking of organic intellectuals, speak to multiple audiences. You can network audiences to link different communities in conversation. Got an issue with how a pipeline, or damn, or mining facility, is negatively impacting a local community, or demand from an urban area is negatively impacting a rural site? Link the conversation through university infrastructure or other venues like re-purposed review theaters. Want to initiate a conversation on how a particular corporation is wreaking havoc around the globe? Link a sequence of research presentations and community video-taped interviews covering the sites where it is active. (Maybe send to its shareholders?)

You can blur the boundaries between conferencing and teaching. Invite your class to a webcast session or show parts of it in class time. You can engage situated knowledges with on-site reports from distant places. You can mobilize the infrastructure for slow and deliberative conversations. You can begin to reconnect with and romance your region. You learn from your land as much as from what others have to offer in other places.

Recipe Two: Conference as a wave (staggered time zones)

This takes a little more imagination to turn a slow conversation across multiple time zones into an asset rather than a liability but it can be done.

Let's say you want to build a connection from east to west across vast time zones – say Montreal to Moscow – more challenging because, well, people need to sleep. But in slow conferencing mode, with a series of staggered interventions you make temporal difference an asset not a liability. You use the same spatial format but instead of people meeting in real time you propose a block of time – let's say a week, over which people convene, watch, reflect, respond. Conversations and

interventions move across the globe like a wave, but the time between live broadcast and its digestion and response become an asset not a liability. This is longform conferencing, not the clickbait of Facebook or other fast media. You organize time to reflect, discuss, respond. Regional conversations grow stronger, intellectual debate becomes more meaningful, thoughtful, reflective.

To conclude, I am sure there are many more recipes for success of alternative modes of conferencing, modes that can build communities – locally, regionally and internationally – but the point is that we need to experiment with change. We also need to demand supports for that change – from our funding agencies, from our institutions, from our governments – instead of applying for travel funds what if we could apply for infrastructural supports to reduce the need for travel, while enhancing the reach of connection and community? What if every travel budget came with a line item for carbon offsetting? (Or, in fact, what if airlines were required to charge the true costs of travel)?

I hope we can seize on this challenge in such a way that looking back, 50 or perhaps 80 years from now, if we still have a planet to reflect on, that a future Foucauldian would find amusing the strange format of conferencing that possessed academia up until the year 2018, where people traveled great distances to stand up for 20 minutes and speak, and then sit down while the next person took their turn. I hope by experimenting with different formats for conferencing we not only reduce our carbon footprint but might build a stronger community, deeper conversations and a healthier planet.