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[👤 patriksv](#) [🕒 October 15, 2019 - 12:05 am](#)

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KTH Humanities Tech event on [Feminist in a Software Lab](#), 2019. Invited Participants in the

photo from left to right: Celina Zander, Jenny Sundén and Tara McPherson (speaking). Photo credit: Danielle Morgan.

I have benefited greatly from comments by Francesca Albrezzi, UCLA, in writing this text.

The publication “Some Thoughts on Making Academic Events with Particular Attention to the Mid-Sized Event” is part of my research program on Conditions of Knowledge Production, which also includes my next book *Human/istic Infrastructures* and a long-standing book project on academic events.

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Introduction

Personal and collaborative stance

I genuinely enjoy working with others creating events. In 2019 I put together a rather extensive [portfolio and narrative](#) relating to academic events I have curated and co-curated over the past twenty years. The primary reason was that I was interested in finding a way to represent this strand of my work (the events, collaborations, networks, sentiment, intellectual threads), and the whole thing also turned into an archival project of sorts. In doing this work, there were some bits and pieces that did not quite fit the format of a portfolio.

One such left-over piece that made me start this project concerns practices that have developed over the years in the context of the events I have curated (always working with others, including Francesca Albrezzi, Danielle Morgan, Emma Ewadotter, Johan von Boer, Roger Mähler, Cecilia Lindhé, Stephanie Hendrick, Lisa Tagliaferri, Mattis Lindmark, Emma

Strömqvist, Jim Barrett, Pelle Snickars, Ulrike Klingemann, Kate Elswit, David Theo Goldberg, Tara McPherson, Molly Wright Steenson, Sverker Sörlin, Natalie Jeremijenko, Erica Robles-Anderson, Matt Ratto, Johanna Drucker, Élika Ortega, Emanuel Moss, Maggie P. Fay, Salman Hussain, Jacob von Heland, Chris Johanson, Sha Xin Wei and many others) as well as the underpinnings of these practices.

Through personal reflection, an ongoing book project (on Human/istic Infrastructure), and what seems to be a growing interest these issues in the academic community (or perhaps they are just more obvious through twitter and other online channels), I have formed a critical and constructive stance regarding academic events and my own practice. I took some of these thoughts further as part of my project as a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (spring 2022), which in turn generated some pandemic and after-the-pandemic experiences and notes.

I am fortunate and privileged to have had support from several universities in carrying out my curatorial work, including Umeå University, UCLA, the CUNY Graduate Center, KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Arizona State University. I have also had valuable support from several funding agencies, including the Wallenberg Foundation and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

What are academic events?

Academic events – including conferences, workshops, symposiums and seminar series – are part of the texture of academic life. They concern the production and dissemination of knowledge in relation to a field, theme or challenge, but also facilitate professionalization, networking, credentialing, job searching, socialization into an academic community, honoring worthy achievements and the making of academic personas. They are ritualistic (Agre 2001) and structural (Ahmed 2017: 149). Conferences are important for the identity and furthering of disciplines and disciplinary intersections. This is how the Society for Cinema and Media Studies describes their annual meeting:

“

The Society’s annual conference provides a forum for scholars and teachers of film and media studies to present and hear new research; to provide a supportive environment for networking, mentoring, and collaboration among scholars otherwise separated by distance, language, or disciplinary boundaries; and to promote the field of cinema and media studies among its practitioners, to other disciplines,

”

and to the public at large, in part through public recognition of award worthy achievements and other significant milestones within the field. [“SCMS Annual Conference”](#), Society for Cinema and Media Studies (Accessed October 2, 2019).

The [SCMS conference website](#) is accompanied by a photo of a lecture with a single speaker standing up on an elevated platform clearly separated from the audience, which is neatly seated in straight rows. Behind her is a large screen with a slide. The photo embeds many of the conventions associated with academic events.

There is also a strong personal, social and cultural aspect to many academic events. As David Lodge reminds us in *Small World*, they sometimes also seem to be semi-touristic getaways for traveling academics (those with enough resources) who meet in different exotic places.

Academic credentials are established through participation in events, and although the ability to “perform” one’s research may not be listed in most resumes, the smart, verbal and quick-on-their-feet scholar can certainly increase their academic attractiveness and career potential. Careers are made, power is asserted and hierarchies reinforced through academic events. The organization of academic events is in itself an assertion of values, ideology, intellectual direction and power structures.

In a moment of climate crisis there is a compelling opportunity to think about new formats, remote and present; to think again about things we take for granted as ways of being together.

I am interested in critically investigating academic events (epistemologically, culturally, socially, materially) as well as taking part in changing and making such events. This critical-constructive interest is also evident in many of the events I have organized (and speaks to an increased interest in ‘making’ in or through the humanities, see e.g. [Matt Ratto’s work on critical making](#) and [Natalie Jeremijenko on creative agency](#)).

The below set of practices, values and suggestions is representative of my personal style and preferences as a curator (I write about curatorship in [Chapter 5](#) of my book *Big Digital Humanities*), and builds on my experience and learning over the years. Some practices are more generic than others, but overall, they slant towards mid-sized, non-serialized events. My own practice-based preference is perhaps something akin to Margaret Mead’s inspirational notion of the small substantive conference (Mead, Margaret, 1968, *The Small Conference*), but on a larger scale, more mixed format and open beyond a small group of chosen individuals. I have chosen to call these “mid-sized events”. Ideally such events encourage and provoke

participants to think differently through curated conversation and sustained knowledge exchange.



Seeing Sideways @seeingsideways · 24h

Yesterday's conference on Critical Visualization [#critviz2016](#) - good reading list and agenda here patriksv.net/2016/04/critic... via @mayameme



← In reply to Catherine D'Ignazio



VJ Um Amel @vj_um_amel · Jun 10

@kanarinka Yes, thank you @patriksv for organizing such a wonderful and interesting event! [#critviz2016](#)



[View conversation](#)



carol chiodo @digitaldante · Jun 10

@patriksv many thanks for a thought provoking day [#critviz2016](#)



meg studer @siteations · Jun 10

thanks @patriksv for amazing visualization conversations & convergences! [#critvis2016](#) On to more wicked, scalar stuff [#LAFsummit](#) [#dredgeFest](#)



Catherine D'Ignazio @kanarinka · Jun 9

Thanks @patriksv for an incredible, provocative day at [#critviz2016](#)!



latelyontime @latelyontime · Jun 9

You can always be sure that when @patriksv organises an event, it is going to make you rethink space, visuals and talks!



Micki Kaufman @MickiKaufman · Jun 9

Planetary intergalactic! @patriksv and @CathyNDavidson kick off the "Unflattening and Enabling Visualization" conference at the @GC_CUNY !



Selected tweets following [“Critical Visualization: Unflattening and Enacting Visualization”](#) at the Graduate Center, NYC, June 9, 2016. More tweets [here](#).

Mead emphasizes conferences being driven by an interest to develop ideas (“which lie somewhere in the middle of the table”, 1968, page 5), multisensory interchange based on speech and by everyone contributing and the format being procedural (but not scripted). There is a sense of conference participants collaboratively changing the way they think about the subject matter. Mead again writes of conferences: “The ideas that grow under such conditions are different from the ideas which any participant would have had working alone, or even working with one or two colleagues. If this does not happen, either the subject matter, the arrangements or the participants of the conference were poorly chosen” (1968, page 6).

I think of events as collective endeavors which can change the way we think about things and the world. Such change, whether small or large, can in turn inform action, whether new intellectual trajectories, networks, publications, collaborations, practices, policy change, institutional change, and change in the world. Processes of change tend to be slow and multi-faceted, and there is no simple metric to judge the importance of academic events. However, studies of individual events or series of event can shed light on such processes.

A useful example is Rachel Corbman’s careful analysis of the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality in relation to the academization and institutionalization of feminism, where she revises and nuances a set of assumptions (“the gloss”) that have followed this important and widely publicized event through “viewing all participants as contributing to a collective feminist knowledge-production project that was in the process of becoming more fundamentally rooted in the academy at this moment in time.” (Corbman 2016:70).

Not only is there no simple way to measure the impact of academic events, but there is also no straight-forward way to anticipate whether a planned event will be successful. It is good practice not to be pretentious or promise too much when framing events, which is likely to be off-putting and anticipate results that are necessarily emergent and unpredictable. Organizers should, however, make sure the event is based on some idea, driving force, agenda or provocation, and build potential through creating grounded and experimental conditions (structure, participants, cost, program, flow, space technology etc.), but also be open to change and emergent trajectories.

Although the work presented here relates to higher education as a whole, it stresses the humanities and humanities-driven events. It also demonstrates an underlying interest in academic infrastructure, particularly for the humanities. On a structural level, events can be seen as part of academic infrastructure. They are also integrated in other infrastructural contexts, including the infrastructural frameworks that higher education provides (Noble and Roberts 2017, Rose Glass 2018, Svensson 2016): facilities, conference software, tools for

scholarly and student writing, email software, presentation tools, data management etc. For example, a key example of institutionalized humanities research infrastructure is the humanities center (as David Theo Goldberg and myself discussed at a workshop in October 2018, and Goldberg’s [UC Humanities Research Institute](#) is an excellent example). Programming and academic events are central to these centers. The Long Room Hub, an Arts and Humanities Research Institute at Trinity College Dublin (directed by Jane Ohlmeyer), hosts [250 humanities and arts events a year](#). Such events may be independent, but are often connected to research groups, annual themes and the agenda of the center.



The Long Room Hub at Trinity College Dublin. Photo credit: Patrik Svensson.

In this guide, I focus primarily on form and structure rather than content, even though these are

of course intertwined. The events I have organized or co-organized have often engaged with themes such as language education and technology, media and technology, visualization, the development of digital humanities as a field, infrastructural imaginaries, affecting academic and societal change, and the future of the humanities.

Simple things

I have included practice-based “simple things” based on the idea that change mostly happens through small steps rather than through major overhaul, and that many small steps make for change. I am inspired by Marisa Parham:

“

It is the difference between what we say we want the world to look like and what we actually carry out in our smallest acts. Carrying, how we carry ourselves in our relationships and how we carry each other, is the real place of transformation.

Parham, “Ninety-Nine Problems,” 683.

”

In actuality, the simple things included are not always simple to carry out, but they are hopefully helpful on some level.

The simple things are listed in short form below to sketch a practical approach to academic events. The list is meant to give an impression rather than to be read in detail, and the simple things can be found in the running text with more context under each relevant section (section links in the list). Other perspectives and advice are embedded in the text and are not signposted as simple things.

1. Grounding

- 1.1 Academic events should manifest and enact the values and perspectives important to the community.
- 1.2 Be clear about why things are done in a certain way.
- 1.3 Introduce a code of conduct, guideline or mission statement.
- 1.4 Situate events locally.
- 1.5 Engage with different disciplinary traditions, modes of representation and methodologies.

2. Prioritizing Early and Mid Career Participants

- 2.1 Do not do bios.
- 2.2 Give early-career scholars/experts their own space (rather than that of a senior person).
- 2.3 Leaders can step down and support early career scholars/experts to moderate/run events.

3. Shared Responsibility

- 3.1 Do not print participant badges – let people fill in their own onsite.

3.2 Ask participants to assist with practical things if there is need.

3.3 Engage participants in dialogue about the event beforehand.

4. Moderation

4.1 Moderators need instructions, support and explicit grounding.

4.2 Moderators also need flexibility and integrity.

4.3 Care about the physical arrangement for the event and the moderator.

4.4 Have someone assist with moderating digital channels.

4.5 Curators/moderators can and should set the tone for an event.

4.6 Moderators/curators should be well prepared, but also need to be prepared to manage dynamic situations.

5. Programming

5.1 Think of events more like a story or flow than a set of session blocks.

5.2. Allow events be shaped and changed by the participants.

6. Caretaking, Community Building and Kindness

6.1 Be clear about values/grounding for the event and enact these values throughout!

6.2 Acknowledge the work of staff and support connection making and integrated work with staff.

6.3 Show appreciation for people's work and engagement before, during and after the event.

6.4 Offer childcare services if possible.

6.5 See events as a platform/set of connections that go back in time and have a trajectory forward.

6.6 Create ways for participants to learn across sets of experience, levels of seniority etc.

6.7 Support bridging epistemic traditions and engaging different modes of engagement.

7. Being Experimental

7.1 Extend and redesign Q&A sessions to give more time for multi-vocal, generous conversation.

7.2 Do not only rely on one-screen presentation infrastructure and slideware.

7.3 Explore ways of connecting the event to the world outside (including concurrent events).

7.4 Experiment with the transactional logic of academic programs (e.g. the value of time and different session types).

8. Mixing Physical and Digital Presences

8.1 Consider other options than using a large display screen to represent remote participants.

8.2. Help remote participants through providing feedback during (photos, extra video feeds etc.) and after the presentation.

8.3 A back channel can help if there are technological glitches or if the remote participant is running out of time.

8.4 Think beforehand about how the remote participant(s) will integrate into the space and the session in question.

8.5 Consider including pre-recorded statements, interviews, video clips and audio in events.

8.6 Do not see remote participants as a second best.

8.7 Consider using localized audio when possible.

9. Infrastructure

9.1 Relate the goals and values of events to infrastructure and consider changing the infrastructure appropriately (when possible and over time).

9.2 Engage with technology and space early on in the curatorial process.

9.3 Make small infrastructural changes and call attention to what conventions and values these changes challenge.

10. Conversation

10.1 Consider prioritizing conversation rather than presentation in the program.

10.2 Support conversational slots through creating credentialing mechanisms.

10.3 Consider having open introductory session as a conversation starter.

10.4 Manage time to support conversation in accordance with the grounding of the event.

11. Getting started

11.1 Consider the required effort, available resources and intended benefits before making a commitment to organizing an event.

11.2 Put together a strong event team and build long-term connections with staff, institutions and collaborators.

11.3 Tell invited participants how you see their contribution and what you think they will get out of the event.

11.4 Let the grounding and values of the event inform the event planning from the very beginning.

11.5 Do not just go for the conventional conference or events spaces, and consider using several venues for the same event.

11.6 Do not feel restricted by conventional ways of carrying out academic events.

11.7 Show respect and interest when engaging with facility managers and potential institutional partners.

11.8 Use microphones and make sure everyone uses them.

11.9 Be as transparent as possible about fees, costs and the model of the event.

11.10 Pay costs directly rather than using a reimbursement model.

11.11 Institutional leadership should consider inviting early-career scholars to organize seminars or seminar series.

12. Pandemic Notes and two experiments

I am aware that there are multiple constraints that make some things possible and others not, and that local conditions, resources and opportunities vary greatly. Many of the simple things and examples can be adapted to fit other's needs.

1. Grounding

Events should manifest the values, considerations, exchanges and perspectives we find important as a community. If we believe that it is important to resist hierarchies, single-voice

events, unproductive question and answer-sessions, meanness, pervasive homogeneity, exploitation of labor, inaccessibility, reiterated power structures, adverse climate change etc., we can shape the format, setup and spirit of the event accordingly. Such shaping will never remove or resolve the challenges and structures in question, but can resist them and make them visible and “out there” (as something that is permeable and challengeable rather than fixed and a given).

Simple thing 1.1: Academic events should manifest and enact the values and perspectives important to the community.

There are benefits to pointing out *why* things are being done in a certain way, especially if done differently from the default model (but not only then). A much less productive strategy – which can be seen sometimes with events such as [THATcamps](#), hackathons and unconferences – is to suggest that the alternative format gets rid of hierarchies etc. (which is of course never true, see e.g. Lilly Irani on “[Hackathons and the Making of Entrepreneurial Citizenship](#)“, Debbie Chachra on “[Why I Am Not a Maker](#)” and Shannon Mattern on “[Methodolatry and the Art of Measure](#)”). Also, we are often not fully aware of how knowledge production is conditioned (see e.g. Drucker and Svensson on “[The Why and How of Middleware](#)”). Karen Tracy makes this important point in her work on colloquiums and academic discourse: “By and large, I would argue, faculty members fail to recognize the full array of ways in which institutional rank privileges them and creates disadvantages for graduate students [...] Because most faculty members are confident that they do not, or would not, abuse power, they presuppose that in a situation in which they speak, the merit of what is being discussed is the only issue” (Tracy, Karen. 1997. *Colloquium: Dilemmas of Academic Discourse*).

Tracy’s detailed analysis of discursive patterns and power helps us to understand and design academic events better. Such scholarship is rare, perhaps because we tend not to look at our own practices critically and because practice-based work has its own needs, logic and expressions. But, for instance, looking at topics such as diversity, slot types, or power structures in a conference series can be very fruitful and provide data and ideas for productive redesign. An example is an analysis of the Digital Humanities Conference with regards to representation and diversity over time (Eichmann-Kalwara, Jorgensen and Weingart 2018, see also Svensson 2011 for analysis of epistemic diversity in the same conference). One challenge moving forward in this context – actually changing things – is the need to step outside the very framework which makes up an annual conference series.

Being clear about things (why, how, laying things bare) at an early stage in an event also assists people with different roles in relation to the event (including moderators) as well as participants. For instance, if participants are provided with a directive at the very beginning that it is important to have many voices contribute to the conversation (not just in principle, but as a success factor and prerequisite) and that this goal will e.g. influence how Q&A’s are

structured etc., it will improve implementing these practices within sessions later on.

Simple thing 1.2: Be clear about why things are done in a certain way (e.g. resisting power structures or invoking multiple voices).

Increasingly, serialized conferences (especially ones run by big organizations) have guideline documents, codes of conduct, protocols or mission statements that bring up some of these questions and concerns. Often such documents will be abstract rather than address direct implementation, but a few factors – e.g. representation on panels – are importantly being given much more explicit attention now.

“

finally someone stating it >> "Panel proposals should strive to ensure a balanced representation of panelists in terms of region, gender and stage of career, in accordance with IPSA's Mission Statement. All-male panel proposals are not permitted." > by [@ipsa_aisp](#) Thanks!

— stefania milan (@annliffey) [July 9, 2019](#)

”

Milan, Stefania. 2019.

It make sense to foreground all-male panels (as they have been far too common). It is rare to find the same argument made for all-female panels, although there are some examples.

“

In contrary to the announcement, I will not be participating in this panel.

In the same way I strongly denounce all-male panels (or "manels") I do not participate on all-female panels. Transformation and sustainability start with diversity and inclusion. <https://t.co/CVbZr74xIM>

— Virginia Dignum (@vdignum) [September 24, 2019](#)

”

In my view, there can be much stronger reasons for having all-female panels than having all-male panels, at least in specific contexts (and directing HUMlab this was a question I had to consider), but Dignum’s position is of course reasonable. And the basic point about diversity (or difference) is important here, and does not only relate to gender.

Guideline documents and codes of conduct will sometimes (but not always) have a note about

accessibility. As Hannabach and Shaw point out in their excellent [guide](#), “many events planned by and for academics still are not accessible to most bodies, which greatly limits events’ intellectual significance, pedagogical effect, political impact, and audience experience.” (Hannabach and Shaw 2017).

Generally these documents will also crucially address unacceptable behavior (“Unsolicited physical contact, unwelcome sexual attention, and bullying behavior are likewise unacceptable”, from the [DH 2020/ADHO Code of Conduct](#)).

Different codes of conducts and instructions vary significantly as to the level of detail and how the process is defined (it is one thing to have a code of conduct and another one to have a detailed process to handle actual incidents). It seems that many conference websites with a code of conduct will list persons of confidence that can be contacted with regards to the code. Other will also outline a more detailed process (which would seem advisable, at least for serialized conferences).

Simple thing 1.3: Introduce a code of conduct, guideline or mission statement. For small events this may seem daunting, but such texts can be kept relatively brief and can bring in a range of aspects that would have to be covered anyhow (e.g. climate change concerns, generosity, the importance of multiple voices). Also, one option is to borrow language from other events or contexts (with permission). If the event takes place at an institution of higher education, there would normally be a set of rules and guidelines that can be drawn on (and that are in fact “active”).

Policies, grounding and values need to be put into practice, and events need to embody them. Sara Ahmed reminds us that the tools used to address a problem can be used to show that the problem has been addressed (e.g. Ahmed 2017:110). Writing about pedagogy, Cathy Davidson states that we “cannot counter structural social inequality by good will. You need to design structural equality into the classroom” (Davidson 2015). Academic events are established and conventionalized sites of knowledge production, which we need to engage with both critically and constructively.

Academic events often have a generic character and standardized feeling to them – especially large ones. They look and feel the same, which is not surprising given the role of standardization, logistics and the logic associated with “cutting edge,” internationalization and academic event industry. But there is something to be said for situating events locally (local campus, scholars, community, artists, challenges, perspectives, etc.) as well as nationally/internationally rather than organizing displaced events that could essentially happen anywhere. Place matters (see also the section below on space).

With very large events, there may not be an option other than a convention center, but there

may be ways of connecting strongly to the local place, including giving the local organizing committee as much power as possible, to address local challenges and perspectives. For example, integrating the local as a case study, doing some activities at local institutions and/or making sure that there is meaningful and rich local participation in the program (and not just to add cultural flavor), can add greater dimension and value to the events proceeds by grounding them within immediate tangibles and frames.

When curating events in HUMlab, I sometimes (especially early on) mistakenly made the program too international and did not include ourselves (or even Sweden) strongly enough. We were situated prominently anyhow through the lab and the local leadership, but we likely lost out on some potential for local embedding and connection making.

Simple thing 1.4: Situate events locally (rather than generically or internationally).

Inevitably, policies, strategies and action will increasingly have to include sections on environmental concerns and foundations in terms of sustainability. How do we deal with the carbon footprint of flying? How do academia and academic events contribute to the ecological goals set up nationally and internationally? How do the subject matter and content relate to climate change and contribute to improving the situation? Although remote participation and online platforms are becoming more common, it is still a largely peripheral phenomenon, or at least one that has not changed the basic logic (see the section on remote participation below). We also need to consider the long-term carbon footprint of the digital systems and storage capacity we use.

“

(1) I think it is time we had a serious discussion about alternatives to international conferences that require large numbers of people to fly. The science is clear that flying is a disaster for the planet: <https://t.co/E8gBFM6h8U>
— James Wood (@drjameswood) [July 29, 2019](#)

”

Wood, James. 2019.

While not likely an either-or choice in practice (although some would argue that it is), we certainly need to take climate change, environmental damage and related themes very seriously. In addressing particularly concerns like flying (but not only), we cannot view matters as a systemic-level question alone. As Nina Wormbs argues, it is simultaneously an individual and a collective issue and this tension is also where we can find some of the necessary solutions ([“Så leder individens handlingar till kollektiva lösningar i klimatfrågan”](#), *Dagens*

Nyheter, July 1, 2019, "How individual action can lead to collective solutions for the climate"). It is simply not good enough to only point to collective solutions or to defer the problem (e.g. through stating that if academics do not fly, others will take their plane seats).

The academy can also be part of "solutions" through contributing their research findings and competence, of course, which in themselves can change the game field. Here humanities-based knowledge can play an important role (as these issues are deeply cultural and social, which also must apply to constructive approaches). There is a growing literature and emerging practice in environmental humanities – and more broadly in integrative and experimental humanities – that is useful here (see e.g. Sörlin and Wynn 2016).

On the level on institutions, there are various ways incitements can be created. KTH Royal Institute of Technology, for example, has introduced an additional internal fee for purchases of flights (from 2020, decision [here](#), in Swedish), which is used to build a fund to support sustainability work at the institute. Some have implemented cross-institutional approaches such as [the framework for climate work](#) recently agreed on by 36 universities in Sweden.

Taking traveling seriously also means that we need to unpack what academic events are, what physical co-presence contributes, ways we can change the format and templates, and also considering how academic traveling is often intertwined with vacation and "experience". Traveling is much easier and frequent for academics who are already privileged also in other ways. Are there ways in which flights could be reduced through "grounded" prioritization (e.g. reducing flying for the most frequent flyers, evaluating the intellectual, collaborative and innovative value of events for the individual and the institution, taxing flights at the institutional level)? What events are most important? Who gets to travel and why? Can we imagine other types of intellectual gatherings beyond the mostly physical conference format or annual serialized conferences? What types of remote participation and online platforms do we need beyond established methods, conventions and systems?

Another kind of grounding has to with the way that the structure and organization of the event correspond and interact with the theme/s at heart of the event. Not every topic should be addressed in the same way, and the program and setup can often be adapted. More generally, events need to be intellectually grounded – in themes, questions, directions, critical rigor, dialogue and intersecting interests.

Academic events allow us to engage with intellectual themes and societal challenges that require different backgrounds and traditions, including critical-constructive approaches that depend on cross-cutting and intersectional work. Creating such meeting places requires ways of introducing and navigating participants through unfamiliar discipline-specific frameworks and practices. For example, it may be possible to use and adapt methodology from crit(ique)

sessions, critical response process, or critical making from art, performance and information design in a context dominated by scholars used to text and discourse as primary expressive modalities. Removing slides (presentation software) from events is another practice-based example. By shifting the terrain, such strategies force systemic habits to be exposed and confronted, which helps us be more critical about our own knowledge practices, as well as extend our epistemic repertoire.

Simple thing 1.5: Engage with different disciplinary traditions, modes of representation and methodologies.

Epistemic traditions and commitments associated with disciplines and domain experts can be very pervasive, and it helps being in an generous, respectful and curiosity-driven environment where these are allowed, challenged and related across areas in relation to a common thematic. Such meetings – the mid-sized event – can be very fruitful.



Mattern, Shannon. 2019.

They can also be challenging to put together and attend. This document is an attempt at discussing what it takes. Pratt’s notion of contact zones can be helpful here: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1991:34). She focuses on heterogeneity and multiple (cultural) perspectives in education and notes how difficult (or impossible) the conventional lecture becomes in that context, and how she instead had to work “in the knowledge that whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways” (1991:39). Other key concepts include trading zones, emphasizing the rules of exchange in interdisciplinary collaboration, and temporary autonomous zones, addressing how unstable (temporary) zones can reduce formal control (Galison 2009, Bey 1991 and Svensson 2016).

Such zones or exchange must be sensitive to multiple modes of engagement (ways of doing things) and support respectful and sharp conversation.

2. Prioritizing Early and Mid Career Participants

An important goal in my own practice has been to give place to early and mid-career participants and make them invited participants (speakers). It has always made sense to me because they produce a great deal of interesting work, provide new energy, and offer potential for future change and development. By expanding the typical range of participants beyond senior scholars and experts and fostering balance among participation overall, we can shift power dynamics within discipline and institutional hierarchies more directly through facilitating such intersections.

The default, hierarchical structure of most academic events privileges senior, well-established participants. This is how keynote and plenary sessions normally work – they give a lot of single-voice time to established scholars in a format that very rarely gives time for substantial conversation. Undoubtedly rewarding for some, but critical questioning of the format reveals gender and power dependencies. There is nothing to stop us from not having keynotes, or making them briefer, or making sure there is plenty of time for conversation. There is also nothing to stop us from giving the keynote stage to early or mid-career participants or to a student (which we did once for an [event on technology and language education](#)). Alternatively, we can “make use” of well-established participants in a different way, for example through encouraging and supporting generosity and mentorship (which can be perfectly combined with sharpness and intellectual rigor).

However, we should be aware that there may be resistance to change. An example: for one major, well-funded event I negotiated with the funding agency about keynotes. For them the keynote sessions were central to how they conceptualized the event. I could also see how the keynotes manifested the event and the high quality that was guaranteed by the keynote names. In the end we ended up making the keynotes shorter (this worked really well), but for the success of the event, I could never have removed the keynotes altogether.

Prioritizing early and middle career scholars and experts also means supporting them as much or more than invited senior scholars and experts, based on the available resources. Another perspective here is to not make a difference between employed/tenure track/tenured faculty-experts and potential participants who do not have such privilege or have chosen other career platforms or strategies.

While different kinds of mentorship work across hierarchy levels is important (and potentially very productive) I also think it is essential that early-career scholar and experts have their own space and time. This almost always happens naturally, but can also be supported by the format and organization. The follow are a set of “simple” things I have found helpful in doing so:

Simple thing 2.1: Do not do bios (they take time, tend to be much longer for the privileged participants, and the information is/can be made available online) – this does not mean not showing respect, but showing the same level of respect to everyone and not wasting time.

[Note September 2021: I still agree with this piece of advice, but would like to add a note about professional titles etc. I would normally use names and not titles when curating (but of course include titles and affiliation on websites etc.), and I think this is fine, but one factor worth considering is that the removal of titles may be easier to “absorb” by people who are more privileged]

Simple thing 2.2: If there is a situation where a senior scholar/expert is given considerable time followed by ‘commentators’ (typically more junior), shift the focus from commenting on the senior scholar’s talk to them commenting on the theme (and of course relating to the first talk as they feel is appropriate). We did this for the [Media Places 2012 conference](#) in HUMlab (and perhaps this freer role also contributed to tweeted appreciation of early and mid career contributions).

“

[#mediaplaces2012](#) I take it as a v. good sign that over the last 2 days I find myself wishing that the "jr." scholars were doing the keynotes
— Tara McPherson (@tmcphers) [December 6, 2012](#)

”

McPherson, Tara. 2012.

Simple thing 2.3: During my time at [the Futures Initiative](#) at the CUNY Graduate Center (2015-2016), I was very impressed with how Cathy Davidson and Katina Rogers not only encouraged graduate student fellows to take leadership/curatorial roles in relation to events, but also provided a structure and “apparatus” for this to happen including discussions in a group, mentorship efforts and having someone look at notes beforehand (and also being able to look at the material of previous fellows). It highlighted also that senior faculty and staff can let their own voices take less place and give early career scholars and experts more space and power.

3. Shared Responsibility

Events often come across as ready-made. We should stress that events are something we do together: a collaborative effort rather than a program to be delivered and consumed. Events (and potential outcomes) are a responsibility not only for organizers, but for everyone participating. This means that academic events are emergent. Organizers/curators create conditions (ideally together with the participants before the actual event), but everyone is

responsible for the end result.

I have found it useful to point to this shared responsibility to everyone at the beginning of events. This is also a good time to talk about the effort and (typically limited) resources associated with the event, introduce the people involved in running/managing the event, and how the event will require everyone to contribute and help out. Doing so moves us away from a view of events as pre-packaged, delivered, commercialized and flawless to embedded, dynamic, human and collaborative.

Simple thing 3.1: Do not print participant labels/badges – get simple sticker labels and color pens and let people do it themselves. Doing so helps break down the sense of “delivered events” and people can choose how they represent themselves. Sticky labels are easier to put on all kinds of clothes and surfaces than other types (in my opinion). Also, it eliminates the risk for getting things wrong or not being prepared to accommodate for latecomers.

Simple thing 3.2: Do not hesitate to ask the audience/participants to help if something unplanned comes up or if there is need for help (e.g. rearranging the furniture). Keep this within reason of course.

Simple thing 3.3: Depending on the size of the event and the available resources, I find it really useful to engage in dialogue with the invited participants beforehand – both individually and in any configuration they will appear in the program (e.g. a pair conversation or a dialogue). I think of this as a way to dynamically and collaboratively foster emergent themes and threads. Balance is essential, however, so that the conversations and sessions do not become too pre-scripted (which is one reason why I do not normally encourage a lot of conversation between participants in a session before the actual event).

4. Moderation

Most academic events will have some type of moderating or convening function: a formal moderator, a chairperson, session leaders, and/or a principal organizer. Moderators (I use this term to cover all of the above roles) will typically open the event, introduce keynote sessions, open sessions, manage time and moderate Q&A sessions.



Moderator handing over the microphone to Sara Hendren at a 2018 event at KTH, Stockholm. Photo credit: Francesca Albrezzi.

We often underestimate the power and potential of the moderator and moderating function. In many cases in academic events, the moderator operates in a fairly low-key or background capacity – serving as a kind of facilitating function. While reasonably efficient, in cases where stronger moderation is required – for example when cutting people short if they are taking up too much time – the more subtle approach may not work (and the moderator may not have the stature, experience or support/backing to do this job well). Moderators should be supported by the values and grounding of the event.

Moderation often follows a set of rules – especially when operating within a limited role. The sequential speaker list for a Q&A session is an example of such a rule: The moderator will look for people who raise their hands, will take note of whom has expressed interest in asking a question or making a comment, and implement this list sequentially. It could be argued that even in its most basic form, such an implementation will give preference to senior people upfront (they are more visible and are recognized, and more likely to take the upfront space to start with). The moderator might cut a q and a participant short, but it is a rare thing and people have strategies to take up time (“I have two questions and a comment...”, “this more of a comment than a question” etc.) and sometimes do their own thing rather than to relate (constructively) to the contribution of the main speaker.

“

We often treat Q & A as something that is to be endured, and are willing to gamble on it not going well by having very passive facilitation. We can shift how we interact with one another and make it better. Thanks to Daniel Heath Justice @justicedanielh for asking about this! 14/

— Eve Tuck (@tuckeve) [June 20, 2019](#)

”

Tuck, Eve. 2019.

I often move closer to the speakers when they are getting close to their allotted time. Physical proximity works well as a marker – I often gradually move closer.

“

I am fond of the instructions I received as a moderator for [#EcoEvoEnto2019](#):

"At 14 minutes, please stand up and advance ominously towards the podium; and at 15 min, ruthlessly cut off anyone who has the ill manners to still be talking."

— Terry McGlynn (@hormiga) [August 17, 2019](#)

”

McGlynn, Terry. 2019.

However, the moderator has to be sensitive so it does not become intimidating. It is the job of the speaker/invited participant to stick to the time allotted as a matter of fairness and to keep an event running smoothly. People get annoyed if there is not control of these aspects.

Doing moderation differently is not easy (depending on your status, experience and backing), but certainly possible. We can introduce alternative practices or rules that remedy some of the challenges of the traditional model, connecting to the core values and groundings of the event, as well as our work and way of being in the world. If we do not want the same people to take up most of the time, a moderator can make sure that there is only one “slot” per participant (which also means scrapping the “speaker list” or at least not following it strictly). Of course, sometimes there will be no other hands up, but a moderator can linger and ask others if they want to contribute (which is easier if the moderator can relate to the work of other participants). The change in dynamic can be encouraged by the moderator walking around in

the space if possible – not just staying upfront.

Careful and deliberate preproduction can support a moderator’s goals. I sometimes talk to one or two people beforehand – especially (early career) participants whom I think may not ask questions otherwise, but I know have important things they could contribute. Moderators should consider how factors such as gender, race and age play into the conversation. It *is* possible for a moderator to not follow the speaker list in order to get a more balanced, multi-perspectival conversation (and this can be achieved in different ways). A moderator can also cut someone short if that person is rude, aggressive or not constructive. Again, this is not an easy task, but definitely possible, and it becomes easier to do if the grounding/guidelines for the event (e.g. civil, constructive contributions expected) empower the moderator and make the rules clear.

An empowered moderator can shift things around as an events unfold. Again, this power is structured, and it is easier for a senior, established person (like myself) to intervene, but reacting when it is possible and relevant is nevertheless important.

At a national workshop on infrastructure for the humanities, I noticed that the concluding, high-level panel was seated with the two women at the ends of the table. This would perhaps had been fine if the table had been longer, but in this case they both came to be seated hugging the corner. The three men were all placed at the center of the table facing the audience straight-on. They were fine, but I asked the group to change the seating arrangement.

“

*Nu bad [@patriksv](#) panelen flytta om eftersom de båda kvinnorna satt på kanten. Rimligt! [#huminfra](#) pic.twitter.com/dNBoXGtno4
— Karolina Andersdotter (@Karolingva) [October 18, 2018](#)*

”

Andersdotter, Karolina. 2019.

Had I thought of it earlier, I could have pre-assigned seating for the panel, and next time I probably will.

Simple thing 4.1: Make sure that people who have moderating functions at an academic event have support from leadership and the groundings of the event, and that they have instructions that help empower them accordingly. For example, if the chair of a conference is clear about no-tolerance for using more than the allotted time at the beginning of the event, this helps moderators enforce this rule (acknowledging the importance of moderators can be done at same time). Technology can also be used to help – we have often used a timer on an tablet or a screen (a risk: some people may get stressed by the the timer).

Simple thing 4.2: Also, at the same time moderators need flexibility and integrity as part of a proactive function. It may be that a conversation should *not* be cut short because it is a crucial exchange that needs another couple of minutes. Allowing such flexibility is easier with one-track events. With large events it might not be possible to grant such flexibility, but it is empowering for the moderators and good for the event (but needs to be aligned with the grounding and perspectives discussed under 4.1 above).

Simple thing 4.3: The physical arrangement (at a mostly physical event) is important. Moderators needs to be in a position that they can see the speakers/active participants and ideally be able to move about. For time keeping it is essential to be able to move closer to the speaker or at least stand up. One of the of the most difficult positions for a moderator is to be “stuck” in the “audience” with little possibility for movement or standing up. It gets even more difficult if it is difficult to establish eye contact with the speaker.

Simple thing 4.4: If there is a back channel or a virtual Q&A at a mostly physical event, it is recommended to have someone else (not the moderator in the physical space) to moderate the digital channels. My experience is that is almost impossible to do both in such a way that you pay enough attention to both the physical event and the digital channels.

Simple thing 4.5: Curators/moderators/organizers can and should set the tone for an event, establishing grounding and values, enact a generous spirit and promote supportive-sharp dialogue.

Simple thing 4.6: Moderators/curators should be well prepared, but also need to be prepared to manage dynamic situations. My own experience (which is not unique) includes keynote speakers not turning up, key technology not working at critical times, aggressive participants, participants who use far too much time, invited participants being upset about something (often not related to the event), pre-ordered cabs and buses not turning up, and much more (see [Brotherhood and van Herwaarde 2017](#) for other examples and useful guidance).

5. Programming

Event programs typically follow conventions and have a set of default building blocks (session types etc.). I discuss some specific opportunities for changing or tweaking these formats below, but the more general point is that the program presents an opportunity to shape the flow, theme and heart of the event.

I have specialized in small and medium-scale events (up to about a hundred people). My preference is single-track events as they afford flow, tempo, juxtapositions and tensions across the entire event. This format does not exclude breakout sessions etc., but is predicated on the event participants engaging in the same conversation and making something together.

The conference is a one-track, dialogic and experimental event and will mix different modalities (presentations, workshops, critical making sessions, lightning talks, artist talks etc.). The exploration of such modalities is in itself an important part of the conference. Participants are encouraged to actively engage across the whole program. (From the description of the [GOSKP conference 2014](#)).

The one-day workshop “Unflattening and Enacting Visualization” brings together a number of exceptional individuals to tackle these and other questions around critical-creative visualization. Some conversations will be focused on actual visualizations and others will focus on what does not get visualized and why. The workshop seeks to take visualization, artistic and algorithmic practice seriously and acknowledges the critical sensitivity and creative power that are part of such work. It also takes seriously humanistic knowledge about visual expressions, performance, history and how categories such as race, class and gender are encoded in materials we often take for granted. (From the description of the [Critical Visualization conference, 2016](#)).

If possible, I try to build in time at the beginning of an event to have an open or semi-open discussion with participants about key issues, where people come from and where we want to go. Sometimes I tell a few people beforehand and mention that I may approach them. In contrast to what I would have done in the past, I give such slots much more priority nowadays.

Surprise, tension, juxtaposition, tempo, variation, intellectually driven themes, epistemic richness and multiple perspectives are important design concepts for many of the events I am involved in organizing. Keen on bringing together many people who have not met before, I search for opportunities to represent different perspectives, expertise and backgrounds relevant for the topic at hand (but not always in an obvious way).

There will often be a sense that much of the important work happens between formal sessions.

“

A good reminder. TBH, far more gets done over coffee at conferences than in presentation sessions!

— Dr. Andrew R. Schrock (@aschrock) [August 2, 2019](#)

”

Schrock, Andrew R. 2019.

Any kind of platform or operation benefits from having liminal, unorganized spaces (see ledema et al. 2006 for an example of “corridor work” in a hospital) where some kind of work can be achieved, although coffee (without the conference) would likely not be enough. On the other

hand, representations of academic events tend to be functional — showing sessions, formal exchange etc. – and necessarily give much attention to informal exchange. I include few photos in this document that cover informal conversations, mostly because I do not want to publish them without explicit permission. They also often have a private sensibility to them.



Vendela Grundell and Jacob von Heland in conversation at the Making Change event, 2018. Published with permission. Photo credit: Francesca Albrezzi.

There is a relation between the core operation – in the case of events: academic sessions etc. – and social and informal opportunities. We should be aware, though, that also informal sessions (receptions, banquet dinners, bar meetings, dinners etc.) are embedded in terms of power, hierarchies and networks etc. That is the point of them, and they are useful not least to early career participants but can also be excluding (who gets invited to dinner? why do the same people meet again and again? is there a cost for dinner?). Ideally the event holds together as a whole, including the social parts of the agenda (which does not mean that there will not be any private meetings of course).

Programs are typically built around a basic structure (including session types) and a set of constraints (including budget and access to space). As pointed out above, there is more flexibility here than one might think. In particular, one-track events allow organizers to facilitate a flow, explore contrasts and support progression over the program in relation to the theme/s in question.

A related question concerns how a program gets populated with participants. One option is to have open calls for proposals, which makes for a program with participants all of whom the organizers did not know. We should be aware, however, that the openness is always limited, depending on the resources available to participants, the framing of the call and on the review and selection process. Furthermore, the selection of speakers for some slots – including keynote sessions – will almost never be open even if it is made explicit that certain concerns should be taken into account (see e.g. ADHO:s [description](#) of how keynotes are selected for the annual conference).

I have often, however, organized events which have not had open calls for papers (but nevertheless an open call, see below). For these events there has been an initial set of invited participants (I use the term “invited participants” instead of “speakers”). This arrangement – as part of a collaborative process – makes it possible to shape the event, make sure different perspectives, backgrounds etc. are represented, create a thematic narrative/trajectory, and have a long dialogue with the participants. We would then post event information, background, readings, and information about invited participants, asking people to sign up. The sign-up form would include a section for mentioning why the topic is relevant and any contribution that the registrant might be willing to make. Such registered participants can then be invited to become invited participants (which is the case with almost all my events). It helps if the registration system is easy to use and gives the organizers immediate feedback when new registrations are made. All different kinds of invited participants can be added until the start of the event.

Not all events can be dynamic up to the point of the event opening (e.g. concerns about logistics) but there is something to be said for keeping events dynamic, current and negotiated until their late stages instead of having everything set months or years beforehand. Ideally programmatic flexibility and adaptability allow for the pre-dialogue associated with making such exchange more strongly a part of the event.

It is true that the type of event outlined above gives considerable power and responsibility to the curator and the team involved, but it also gives an opportunity to create conditions and opportunities that would likely not happen otherwise. These events should be seen as merely one type among many in an 'event ecology'. With explicit curatorial leadership, participants can share in a clearer sense of who is responsible.

Simple thing 5.1: Think of events less like a series of predefined blocks and more like a flow, a story and a set of interactions and productive tensions. Play with time, use of space and rhythm.

Simple thing 5.2: Allow events be shaped and changed by the participants in a process that starts well before the event.

6. Caretaking, Community Building and Kindness

Part of enacting best practices for hosting conferences and events entails taking good care of guests (regardless of their stature) and to support community building and connection making. This is not just polite and good etiquette – it foregrounds sentiment, grounding, friendliness and generosity. Niceness and hospitality do not preclude critical sharpness and intense intellectual engagement (quite the opposite).

Kindness does not just apply to organizers, but also guests need to be constructive and helpful. In general it helps to have clearly established (but not too inflexible) routines and clear and updated information.

The organizers can set the tone for an event. These curators have ways of structuring the program to make sure such perspectives and values (kindness, compassion etc.) are manifested early on. Opening a conversation up with different voices and perspectives can be one way (I will sometimes give advance warning to some people). I often ask what participants are expecting and what they bring (in terms of content, perspectives, modes of engagement etc.). Sometimes this will lead to a substantive content-focused discussion and other times it will be a way of getting a sense of where people come from and different institutional realities.

Another way is to give a generous person, often a 'senior' participant, a few minutes to informally talk in the beginning. An example: Anne Balsamo did this at [“Digging Deep: Ecosystems, Institutions and Processes for Critical Making” workshop](#) (the Graduate Center,

2015). Not only was it an amazing, personal introduction, but it helped set the tone for the whole event. There is a connection here to what Kathleen FitzPatrick calls “generous thinking” (FitzPatrick 2019).

Simple thing 6.1: Be clear about basic values and grounding (including the importance of generosity, collaborative constructive work and sharpness) and enact these values throughout!

Simple thing 6.2: Include staff and experts in the event, acknowledge their work, and create opportunities for connection making and integrated work that involve them. Make sure there are enough staff for there to be time to engage in conversation/support with participants.

Simple thing 6.3: Show appreciation for people’s work and engagement before, during and after the event.

Simple thing 6.4: Offer childcare services if at all possible (and as the tweet below shows, this is not just a matter of having the will and the resources).

“

We have to talk about this thing where lawyers won’t let people offer childcare (or any permutation, such as “childwatch”!) for campus events! It’s f’ing evil!

— Miriam Posner (@miriamkp) [July 21, 2019](#)

”

Posner, Miriam. 2019.

Simple thing 6.5: Do not see events as a one-off, but rather a platform or a set of connections that go back in time and have a trajectory forward.

Simple thing 6.6: Create ways for participants to learn across sets of experience, levels of seniority etc. (can be formalized through meetups, mentorships programs etc.).

Simple thing 6.7: See the event as a meeting place also through inviting different kinds of people that have not met before. Support ways of bridging epistemic traditions and engaging different modes of engagement/modes of expression.

One place in which kindness and a sense of community is important is after the sessions for the day are over and people disperse to various engagements (often surprisingly planned and clique-like) or start to group in the lobby. Not everyone is or feels included, and inviting someone to a dinner or reaching to someone standing by themselves is not just a gesture, but enacting the spirit of the event.

7. Being Experimental

Academic events are normally conventional with regards to the format: session types, use of space, media use, infrastructure, scheduling strategies, keynotes etc. These structural elements are often taken for granted and the result of various constraints, but there are ways of tweaking the defaults and breaking expected or known formats up (given that there is a good reason of course). Changing the format and introducing new unknown elements can give substantial benefits, especially if demonstrating an overall grounding or idea, but also mean that the outcome is less certain.

I am advocating for grounded engagement and experimental practice rather than for overhaul or large-scale use of experimental methods or processes (even the latter can also be powerful and important). Many changes and experiments will be small, but important anyhow. An experimental approach can add to the dynamic quality of an event, call into question conventional formats, and present scholarly and conversational opportunities. A basic stance is: If we want the scholarship to be pushing boundaries and if our work calls into question knowledge production elsewhere, it makes sense to also engage with our own formats for knowledge work experimentally.

I will give a few examples in the following, some of which relate to perspectives brought up elsewhere in this document. One example concerns the Q&A session. There is a standard format that embeds values and tradition, and that tends to privilege a few voices in the context of a short time frame.

Simple thing 7.1: Extend and redesign Q&A sessions to give more time for multi-vocal, generous conversation.

Changing the format might require reducing the time for presentations, empowering moderators to not follow speaker order strictly, cutting people short when necessary, engage direct conversation between people in the audience and not giving only a few people (often senior) a lot of time and space.

Another example concerns taking slides and presentation software as the norm (see Robles and Svensson 2016 for an analysis of PowerPoint and presentation culture). Packaging whatever argument participants want to make as a PowerPoint or Keynote file is now what is expected for most events. Presentation culture does not only promote such packaging, but also the way we set up and use space, and the ways we structure events as sites of knowledge production.

Simple thing 7.2: We do not need to rely on one-screen presentation infrastructure and slideware.

In my own practice, I have experimented with a range of formats including not using

presentation software (disallowing PowerPoint/Keynote), trying alternative formats out (such as pair conversations), resisting conventional panel sessions, give less time to keynotes, bringing in “distributed” people in a number of different ways and giving them proper space in the program (but almost never projecting them on the big “presentation screen”).

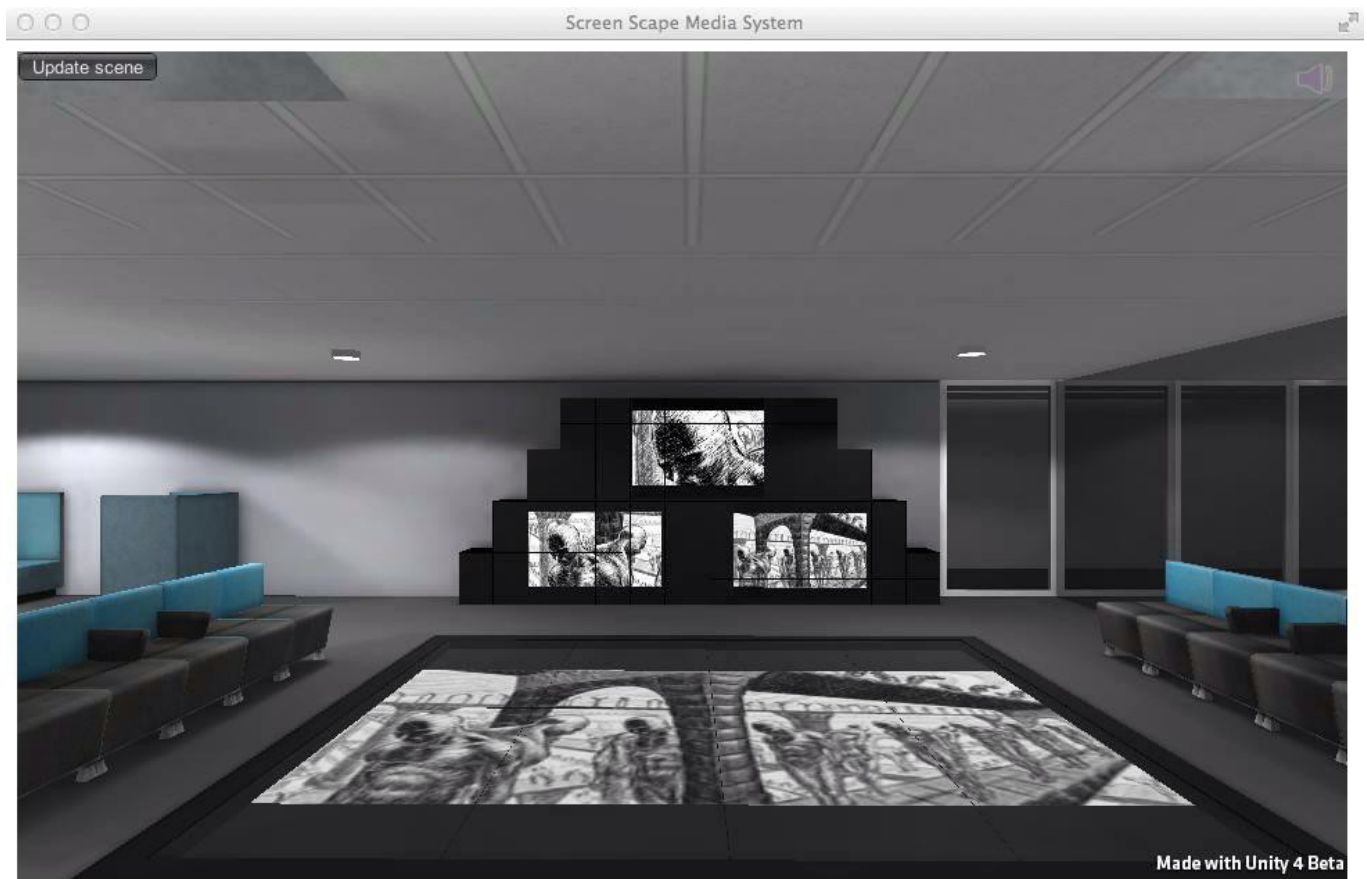
For example, we discouraged the use of slideware in the 2014 conference Genres of Scholarly Knowledge Production (and asked participants to engage with our infrastructure through a media system we made available).

tools for uploading, simulating and situating such content (images, film and audio). The use of slideware such as PowerPoint and Keynote is discouraged/disallowed. Furthermore, specific sessions will be concerned with critically reflecting on the

From the instructions for the GOSKP conference 2014

Since the topic of the event was scholarly knowledge production it seemed particularly appropriate to engage experimentally with the format. We wanted to expose some of the structures and templates associated with academic events as knowledge production as well as provide an opportunity to engage creatively with the format.

We used several locations within the lab to accommodate the event, and the media system we had built (partly developed for the event) made it possible for participants to create multiple-screen scenarios/narratives for their slots and locations. The software also allowed participants to simulate the scenarios in a 3D browser, which also gave the invited participants a sense of the space and infrastructure before the actual event.



Screenshot from the Media System developed by HUMlab (Lead/PI: Patrik Svensson).

For the Critically Making the Internet of Things conference in 2011, Matt Ratto was the first speaker directly following the opening by the Vice Chancellor ([program](#)). I wheeled him on stage (the screen was on a stand with wheels). The experimental component was playing with mobility and display size (not having the speaker on a big, stationary screen) as well as placing a remote participant in the very first program slot.



Matt Ratto as a beginning speaker at a HUMlab event, 2011. Photo credit: Umeå University.

Another example: At one of the UCLA DH seminars, which was a rare single-speaker event entitled “All Your Data Are Belong To Us: Quantifying the Human Condition” with Shannon Mattern, we experimented with creating a secondary participation channel by projecting a collaborative google doc that attendees could add to as Mattern presented. This was made possible through the elongated screen in the Visualization Portal at UCLA.



UCLA DH Seminar with Shannon Mattern, 2017. Photo credit: Francesca Albrezzi.

While this simple experiment worked as a proof of concept, there was limited activity in the google doc outside the organizing group. Some experiments need to be developed and integrated over time to reach full impact. Other experiments never take off, but can be valuable anyhow as part of a learning process. Many things you will simply not know unless you concretely try them out. It also takes time for people get used to new approaches or changes in established ones. It often helps to introduce experimental components and tell participants why they are included.

The use of the elongated screen described above relates to a series of other experiments using multiple screens for managing multiple channels. For example, in HUMlab we would display event-related tweets show on a secondary screen or on a wall screen in another part of the lab. How multiple channels are juxtaposed and managed is important, which is clear from danah boyd's account of when a back channel took became a front channel in a 2009 event (boyd 2009). We found that placing tweets peripherally in the space decreased the risk of the tweets becoming central.

Another example of mixing channels was when we once connected to several ongoing conferences through using a visual twitter app on a large triptych screen (creating a window to

those events that could easily be shifted to show tweets relating to our own conference forming a connection across the multiple events in real time).



Visual representation of tweets (driven by event hashtags). Photo credit: Umeå University.

Simple thing 7.3: Explore ways of connecting the event to the world outside (including concurrent events).

Another parameter that can be explored experimentally is the logic embedded in programs. Academic events have a transactional logic to them: More allotted time is better, certain spots in the program are better than others, people physically present in the space are more important than remote people, it is better to have a titled presentation (paper or poster, although the latter will normally be less prestigious) than being part of session where you do not your own titled component (e.g. a round-table session), etc. There are ways of resisting, changing and tweaking this logic.

Simple thing 7.4: Experiment with the transactional logic of academic programs (e.g. the value of time and different session types)

One possibility is to create a more fluid time frame around sessions. Make them conversational/dialogic instead of being based on time allotted to individuals. Be clear that

some conversations will take longer and others less time (and both are perfectly okay), and stress that everyone contributes to the overall conversation session. There is nothing to stop such contributions from having a title (even if the slot is fluid) if that helps grant seeking and other funding or professional development. We can still be sensitive to the pressures which various measuring sticks have on careers while simultaneous experimenting and exploring new avenues for academic exchange and progress.

8. Mixing Physical and Digital Presences

In practice, using video conference or Skype to bring speakers and participants into a physically situated event is often viewed as a second-best option when someone cannot make it or because there are limited resources. Such participation tends to be implemented by projecting a person's video feed on a big screen in the space used for the event. Usually limited attention is given to the remote participant's experience of the session or event beyond the feed streamed by the device used to facilitate the video.. While this is a model that works on some levels, it is also problematic.

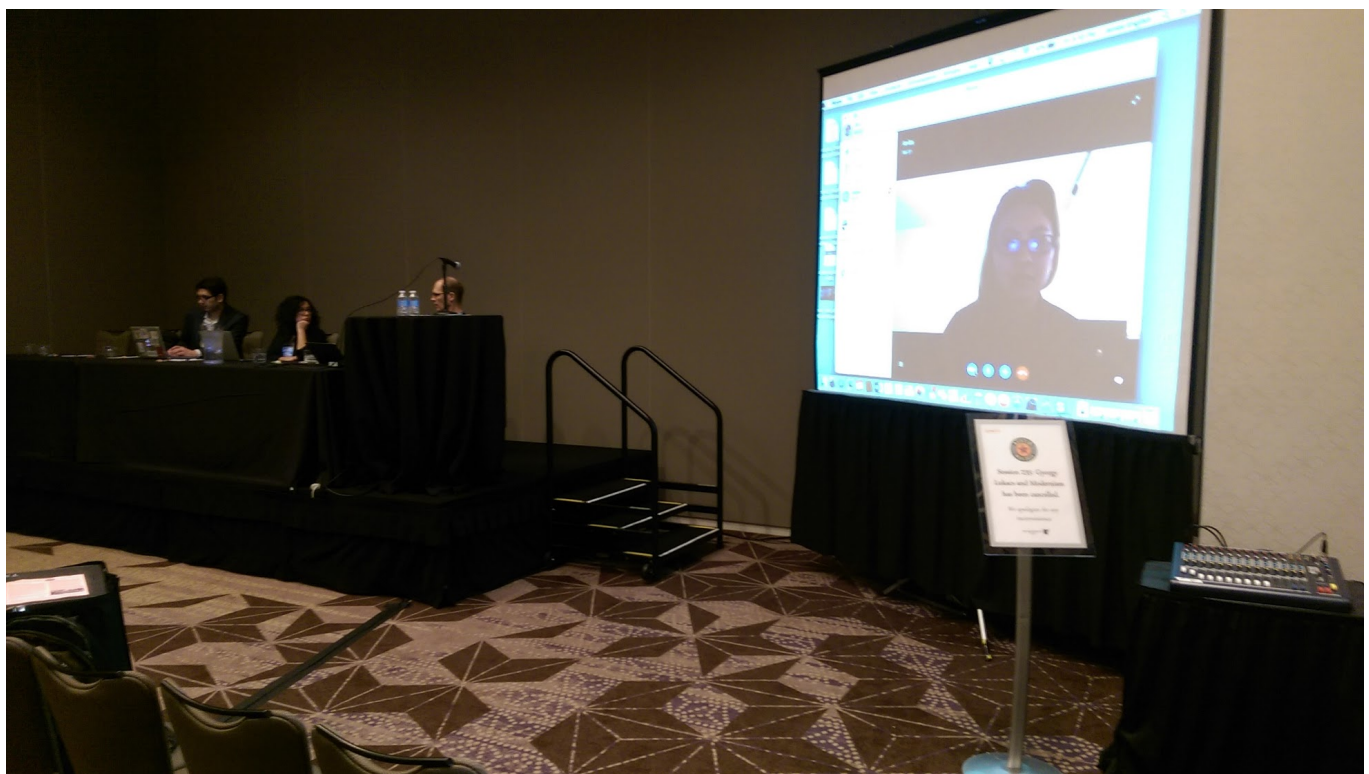


Photo from the MLA conference 2016. Photo credit: Patrik Svensson.

It is easy to understand why people get projected on the big presentation screen. The default infrastructure of most lecture rooms and venues includes one screen and it is usually connected to a computer or can be easily be hooked up a laptop. But – really – it is a rather strange thing to have someone's face shown at an enormous scale on a screen almost always used for delivering content (e.g. reading slides). The material conditions of remote participation matters. In her work on video conferencing in language education, Inger Enkvist points to how important it is that both the teacher and the students are equally sized and

equally well lit (Enkvist 1995).

The image above is from a 2015 MLA panel, where the peculiarity of the spatial configuration is apparent. The one remote panelist is visible on a big screen that is slanted towards the audience, whereas the panel (with human-sized heads) is seated in a row parallel with the wall. This creates a weird kind of dynamic (the panel itself was good so this is not a comment on the content side of things). I do not know what the remote participant could see of the room at her end, but it is likely that she could not see her fellow panelists or the setup of the space (most likely, she would at least see part of the audience). Typically, the sound will come from an ambient speaker setup in a lecture hall like this one, which means that the voice of the panelist is not localized, but rather takes on a god-like quality. The panelists in the space will also be broadcast through the speaker system, but most of the audience will also pick up the localized voices.

Simple thing 8.1: Consider other options than using a large display screen to represent remote participants.

Simple thing 8.2: Consider what remote participants see/hear and whether to include extra video feeds so that they may see the presentation area in real time, send photos of the venue beforehand, and/or give rich feedback afterwards (including video if available).

Simple thing 8.3: A chat channel/text messaging can help if there are technological glitches or to signal that the remote participant is running out of time.

The quality of the audio from the remote participant is naturally important. It makes sense to test the audio and connection beforehand and also to check in with the remote participant about their visuals (discuss what kind of room, background, lighting conditions etc. and advice them to make sure the camera captures their face well). Jill Walker Rettberg points to the importance of such matters, and acutely observes how we are likely to spend money and attention on some things, but not on others:



Jill Walker Rettberg

September 18 at 8:53 AM ·



If you have a remote keynote speaker for your conference (which is certainly better for the environment than flying an expert from Australia to Europe), spend the money saved on the flights on a really good microphone and ship it to the speaker in advance.



You and 41 others

10 Comments



Like



Comment

Walker Rettberg, Jill. 2019.

Remote participation is likely to become even more common, just like other forms of mixed participation as well as all-digital events. An important push will be climate change and environmental concerns. We have only seen the beginnings of this change, and while earlier, remote participation would be generally encouraged in some policy documents, there is now a stronger realization and emphasis on the fact that global conferencing and academic travel need to be considered in these terms. For example, 36 universities in Sweden just [agreed on a framework for climate work](#). See the section on [Grounding](#) above for an expanded discussion.

My own practice has involved a great deal of digital-only scholarly work and event making, especially early on and especially in the context of educational projects. Together with Pat Shrimpton I was the PI of a project that used a virtual world to empower students to bring together linguistics, literature and cultural studies around specific themes for B.A. thesis in English. The virtual world became an arena to carry out the work and explore alternative modes of expression. The students started out with an empty world and became the builders in these projects (Svensson 2009, see also project report, [Svensson 2002](#)).

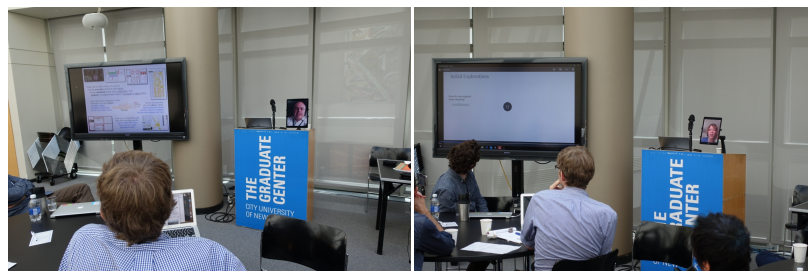


Screenshot from the Virtual Wedding Project (1999-2000)

We ran several projects that utilized different types of virtual environments and collaborative platforms as part of furthering learning in the context of academic language education. Many of

these projects were European-level and incorporated student teams across many countries who worked together on identified challenges. See Damer 2008 for a useful resource on event making in virtual worlds. A more recent version of distributed events is the webinar or lightweight, often web-based video conference (although video conferencing is not a new phenomenon).

In terms of physically based events with remote participants, I have been involved in several where we experimented with different models of presence. One such model brings in people on large iPads using a grip and a wireless bluetooth speaker or an ambisonic conferencing device. I did this the first time (I think) for the [Critical Visualization conference](#) at the Graduate Center in June 2016. I remember spending lots of time on setting up the technology and getting the right grip.



I arranged the technical displays so that we could have slides/content on a monitor at the same time as having a speaker present in the space on the iPad screen. This worked well, although you might argue that it replicates a standard setup. Although one of the largest tablets available at the time, the screen would benefit from being a bit larger. This is especially true if the incoming video does not focus on the head/face only, which we tried to get participants do, but is challenging in practice.

Some things you only learn when you try things out. This event took place in a great (privileged) space at the Graduate Center with round tables and decent space between the tables. I was also lucky to help from the Lisa Tagliaferri (the CUNY Futures Initiative) and Laila Shereen Sakr (invited participant from UCSB who gracefully offered to help).



[The Skylight Room](#) at the CUNY Graduate Center, NYC. Photo credit: Patrik Svensson.

During the Q & A I found myself walking around with the speaker (i.e. the iPad and the bluetooth speaker/conference phone). In some cases, I put the speaker down so that there could be a “direct” conversation between the remote speaker and the local participant.



Martha Hollander in conversation with Nina McCurdy (remote) as part of “Experienced Reflections” at Critical Visualization, 2016. Photo credit: Lisa Tagliaferri.

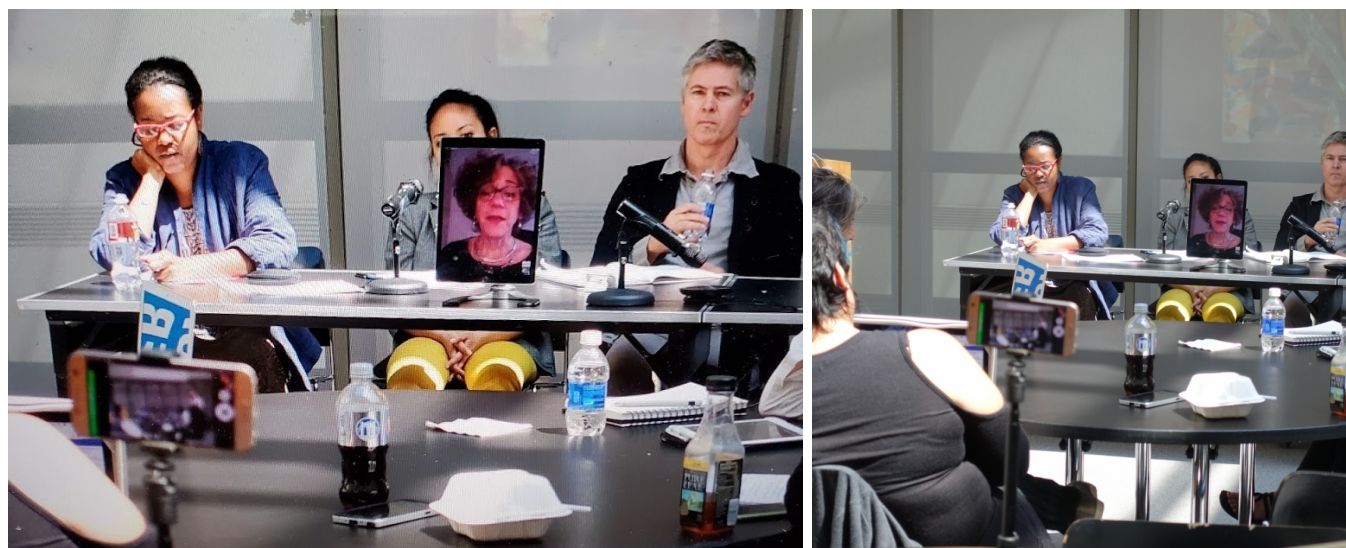


Catherine D'Ignazio talking with Nina McCurdy (remote) at the Critical Visualization event, 2016. Photo credit: Lisa Tagliaferri.

I have taken this further in other events, preferring to hold the speaker while s/he is talking (instead of putting the person in the speaker position upfront). A good steady grip is necessary when attempting this. When I performed this choreographed telepresence with Johanna Drucker in Stockholm in May 2019 with a bad grip (I had difficulties finding the kind of grip I needed so resorted to using one meant for holding an iPad to a music stand), she complained about the unsteady movement. The challenge is also that the field of vision (given through the webcam of the iPad) is limited. As a strange arrangement, carrying someone around like that

comes with responsibility.

At the Graduate Center event, we also included a panel with a remote participant (again Johanna Drucker). The topic of the panel was “What doesn’t get visualized, shouldn’t be visualized, should be visualized but isn’t?” and the participants were: Lauren Klein, Johanna Drucker, Kelli Moore, Benjamin Schmidt, Patrick Simon and Martha Poon.



As a whole the panel worked out well, but the remote participation was not optimal (not the remote participant but the setup). An interactive format is much more difficult to implement. It is simply hard to get good enough sound quality and feedback for a remote participant to be an active interlocutor and conversationalist. Johanna Drucker did a wonderful job, but the setup, which fell under my responsibility as the event curator, was not adequate to allow her to hear well. Additionally, as is evident from the photos, physical space for Johanna (the iPad) was limited. I changed the position of her (the iPad) several times, but the arrangement shown in the photos above illustrates the way the iPad obscured other panelists from certain vantage points. A dedicated space should have been provided for her telepresence on the table and we should also thought more about the audio interaction. However, as an experimental setup, we did learn from it.

Simple thing 8.4: Think beforehand about how the remote participant(s) will integrate into the space and the session in question.

Apart from conducting live telepresent participation, I have also included filmed interviews when people could not participate in real time or when a recorded format seemed better and more appropriate for the situation than a live one. For the Critical Visualization event, I interviewed four people about key themes relevant to the event: [Giorgia Lupi](#) (Information designer), [Barry Smith](#) (School of Advanced Studies, London), [Mimi Onuoha](#) (Brooklyn-based artist and researcher, Data & Society Research Institute Fellow) and [Carter Emmart](#) (Director of Astrovisualization, American Museum of Natural History). Sometimes I have integrated the interviews into the event (often played on a tablet) and sometimes I have made them available

beforehand.



Screenshots from video clips used in the Critical Visualization event 2016

Typically the interviews and clips are brief and integrated into the program. Sometimes I have used longer clips, e.g. when Matt Ratto spoke at the 2018 workshop on Making Change. This was a central statement for the event.

<https://vimeo.com/296519680>

Video recording of Matt Ratto used at an event at KTH, 2018.

As another example of “bringing in” external participants, I utilized pre-recorded responses for a keynote I gave at the inaugural Nordic Digital Humanities Conference 2016. I had asked a number of international digital humanities experts to give advice to the new Nordic organization. After receiving these responses via email (14 in total, 10 was used), I edited them for brevity. Stephanie Hendrick expertly read and recorded them.



At the talk, I played Stephanie’s 8 minute recording and juxtaposed the audio with slides of key quotes. I remained silent. I documented this simple experiment (including the contributions) in a [blog account](#).

Simple thing 8.5: Consider including pre-recorded statements, interviews, video clips and audio in events. Normally these should be brief and add something distinct.

Simple thing 8.6: Do not see remote participant as a second best. When possible, make sure to give these participants good slots in the program and do not apologize for them being physically remote. Perhaps encourage them to be unapologetic as well.

Various collaborators and I have experimented with mobile screens, large and small, too. The direct impetus to experiment with mobile setups came when I moved from Umeå, where I had access to a large lab facility, to New York City and Los Angeles, where the events I engaged in had less access to set infrastructure.



Mandana Seyfeddinipur talking about “Knowledge Platforms and Diversity” at the 2014 GOSKP conference. Photo credit: Umeå University.

In my earlier work at Umeå University, we created a facility to do a series of experiments over time, driven by the needs arising from intellectual themes, technological experiments and a series of high-profile events of different kinds. It was a inspiring learning experience in a very privileged environment.

In the 2013 [Sorting the Digital Humanities Out workshop](#) at HUMlab, we had a session with five remote participants where we made use of curved space and the media infrastructure in one part of the lab. There was local sound for each participant, which meant that it was possible to interact with the remote participants individually in the break leading up to the session.

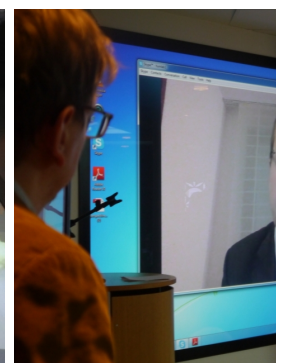


Simple thing 8.7: Consider using localized audio when possible. It helps connect the visuals (the video/stream) with the voice, even for stationary setups, but is of course even more important for mobile setups. Such solutions do not have to be expensive or high-tech.

Some of these setups in HUMlab were clearly experimental and “installation like.” As part of the 2014 [GOSKP conference](#), I arranged to have a pre-recorded video of Johanna Drucker addressing “Questions about argument” playing on eleven surrounding screens simultaneously as she was live on a twelfth screen. In a sense, she became both a participant and a speaker, as she listened to herself while waiting for the Q & A).



The following photographs document some other setups and experiments from HUMlab to do with remote participation: using a floor screen for student presentations, a workshop setup to enable a critical making session, an international workshop on digital humanities with five people on a wall, and a representative for the Australasian organization for digital humanities on a large back projected screen. The images demonstrate how models for remote presence and academic exchange can be tested and linked to media and technology research in the context of humanities-driven experimentation.



9. Infrastructure

Infrastructure has emerged as a key way of framing and imagining academic work over the past twenty years, manifested by research infrastructure road maps, university task forces, funding

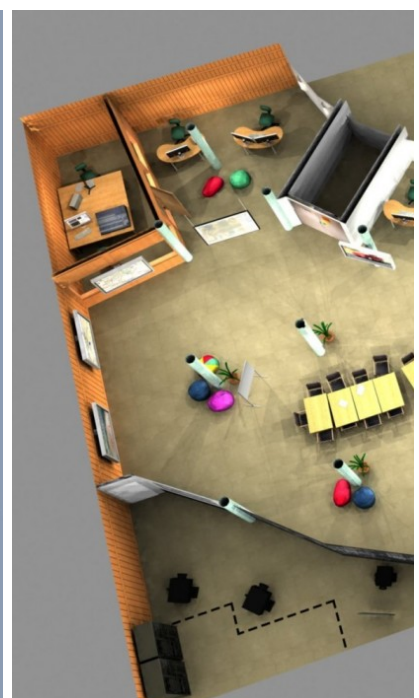
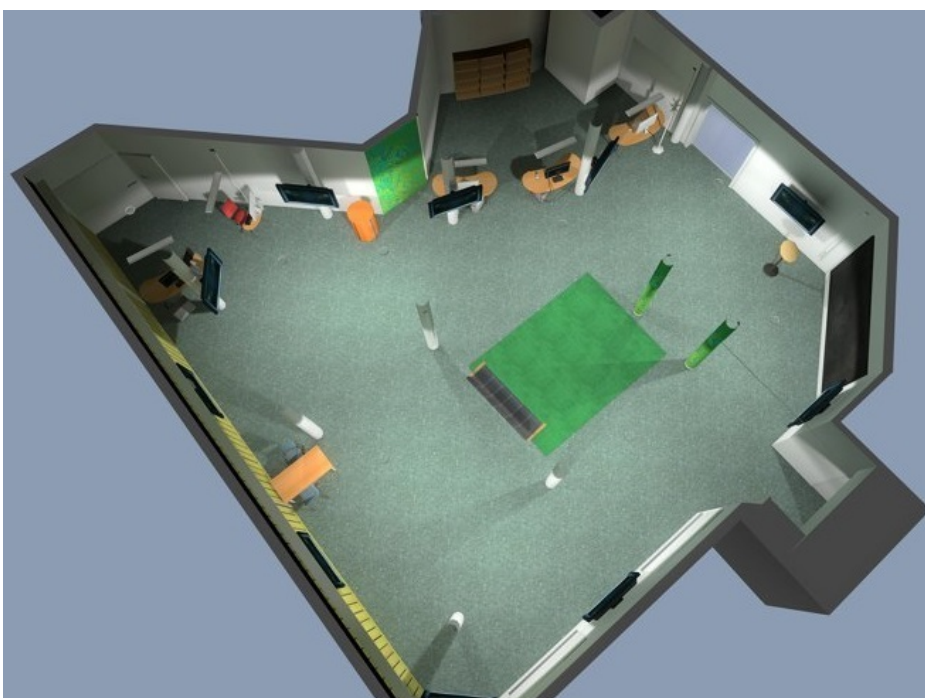
schemes and ‘infrastructure thinking’ (Svensson 2017). There is a logic to infrastructure, which is centered around technology, projected scientific breakthroughs, resources and business plans. While academic infrastructure is typically associated with science, technology and engineering, it has gradually come to incorporate the humanities and social sciences.

Academic events can be considered infrastructural in their role as underpinning academic work. They shape the operation of academia – probably much more than we acknowledge. They are about the pursuit of knowledge and academic work, but are also professionally, culturally and socially embedded. Academic events are also infrastructural in how they are conditioned by material and organisational manifestations and templates (program structures, proposal and registration systems, spaces, presentation technology, control systems, online communication etc.).

Simple thing 9.1: Relate the goals, values and intellectual gist associated with events to infrastructure. Consider changing the infrastructure appropriately.

The interplay between conceptual, organisational and material aspects can be central to adapting and developing formats and ideas associated with events. For example, space and technology can help generate ideas for how to carry the event out. The oblong screen in the Visualization Portal at UCLA helped work out a format for pair conversations (see under 10) and also for juxtaposing presentation slides and a shared, live document (see under 8 above).

Another example is the screenscape we built in HUMlab in 2008 (documented in Svensson 2015-2016, [Angled Screens](#)) as part of an infrastructure to support different types of humanistic work, collaborations, and performance. The central table (for dialogue, conversations, workshops etc.) was central to the concept, just like a series of peripherally placed screens (the screenscape).



This setup was flexible and structured at the same time, and it allowed us to carry out everyday work (events, research, student presentations, indie game evenings) as well as experimental work (art installations, software for creating narratives between screens etc.). Having an open space built for social communication with many screens (instead of one) helped us reflect on and rethink our practice. On a personal level, I remember shifting from talking about the lab (to the many visiting delegations, researcher groups etc.) in front of a large screen with people seated to a more dynamic setup, where I would walk up to the one of the smaller screens, asking people to come close to me, and then tell the ‘story’ through walking between the screens. This change increased conversation, engagement, facilitated retention in the space (not one slide replacing another one), and helped me tell the story. We used a similar approach also for teamwork and presentations at events. The below photos are from the 2013 Sorting the Digital Humanities Out event.



We were drawing on a large-scale infrastructure, but infrastructure to accommodate changing practices can be much more simple and agile.

Simple thing 9.2: Engage with technology and space early on in the curatorial process.

Because it often relates to structures and can seem “big” (think of a railroad system, water infrastructure or conference infrastructure), many often presume infrastructure calls for large-scale change—a worthy goal but a daunting task. Small adjustments may be more important and realistic (especially if aggregated). In terms of conference proceedings, avoiding introducing speakers at length, asking participants to help out with the event, changing the layout of a space, adding a second mobile screen, or reworking speaker instructions is easier than to introduce radical reconfiguration. Such interventions call attention to infrastructural conventions (and should be announced as appropriate) and can give rise to long-term interventions and change. We need both types of intervention and should consider academic work in its epistemological, cultural, and social context.

Simple thing 9.3: Make small infrastructural changes and call attention to what conventions and values these changes challenge.

10. Conversation

Most academic events prioritize presentations rather than conversations.

Over the past several years, I have increasingly focused on curated conversations as an essential building block and sentiment of academic events. I found myself wanting to include more time for conversational exchange in the events I organized. Trying out “pair conversations” during a few events in NYC in 2015 and 2016 contributed to this shift. The program segment below is from the December 2015 event [“Digging Deep: Ecosystems, Institutions and Processes for Critical Making”](#).

Session 2, 3-5:30 pm

Getting Beyond the Material-Conceptual to Include the Critical

Introduction

Pair Presentations

Thomas Augst on NewYorkScapes

Anne Burdick on Micro Mega Meta

Dennis Tenen on Rapid Prototyping of Speculative Thought

Pelle Snickars on Spotify Teardown

Roopika Risam on Intersectionality as Making

Sara Hendren on Slope: Intercept

Patrik Svensson and Erica-Robles Anderson on From Napkin to Infrastructure

Maria Sachiko Cecire on Experimental Humanities

Danielle Carr and Daniel West on States of Monstrosity

Matt Ratto on the Critical-ness of Making

Lev Manovich on Critical Making in Digital Art Programs

Matt Gold on Building Commons

I called them “pair *presentations*” at the time, but this format had conversational and very productive results. The participants were adept conversationalists. We restricted the use of slides, provided some structuring for time (I initially framed sessions in terms of 5 + 5 + 5 minutes per pair, but there was additional time available if needed). The format seemed to foster energy. In some cases, conversations were dynamic and (including the one with Risam and Hendren) really changed the nature of the event/shifted the center of gravity. Others built momentum, but were briefer.

We arrived at a fluid format and I tried to stress the flexibility of time arguing that it is perfectly okay to have exchanges that last different lengths of time where some dialogues may be concise and other conversations would naturally take off and perhaps involve everyone present in the room. Being able to accommodate a shift of time allocation was important to me. “Stacked” pair conversations (six conversations in the same time slot) as well as having other “open” sessions being part of the same sessions helped make this possible. There was simply enough “space” built into the program to be flexible. The format was not at all set and developed through the event. Additionally, we continued to shape the dialogic format in the

aftermath through what we learned from the conference.

Simple thing 10.1: Consider prioritizing conversation rather than presentation in the program.

Simple thing 10.2: Create reward/credentialing structures to support conversational slots (e.g. through “paper titles”).

One assembly that worked really well in this conference was to have four introductions/statements by Anne Balsamo, Matt Ratto, Natalie Jeremijenko and Allison Burtch. Morphing into a conversational session, Anne Balsamo, a seasoned senior scholar, very generously contributed to grounding the whole event through her own experiences and rich framework. Her statement was open, frank and inspirational. The subsequent conversation included other senior scholars and leaders – including Cathy Davidson – as well as many early-career participants.

A simpler but effective form of introductory session is to set aside 30 minutes in the program for an open initial conversation, which can encourage participants to talk about what they bring to the event and their expectations as well as identify some key issues. Starting an event with a conversation can send a meaningful signal, especially as we often expect to be receiving or delivering content. Such sessions should ideally be prepared through approaching a few people beforehand (just in case), but regardless, the moderator/curator will have to be prepared to manage an untalkative group.

Simple thing 10.3: Consider having open introductory session as a conversation starter.

My growing interest in the role of humanities-based knowledge and human values in society – as part of an extended dialogue with a group of scholars and activists – made me consider the need for prolonged conversation more carefully. I organized a couple of events on “making a difference” and “making change” 2016-2018. These topics seemed to call for curated conversation rather than presentations, and ample time was needed to facilitate in-depth, multi-perspectival discussion. I discussed some of the rationale behind one of these events in a [background interview](#) for a 2016 event in London with Natalie Jeremijenko, David Theo Goldberg, Gary Dirks, Barrý Smith and Gargi Bhattacharyya. It was simultaneously a challenge, delight and privilege to moderate such a high-caliber conversation. Again, there was no medium (powerpoint etc.) being used.

Introducing new formats can be challenging to invited participants, and it is important that the curator has a dialogue with the participants beforehand. We are used to doing “presentations” (often with the support of slides) and carrying out associated structured conversations, and for example, asking participants to not use slides and to engage in pair conversations can be a tall order. I have been fortunate that participants have been willing to take part in experimental setups, and their engagement and feedback have been central to my curatorial work.

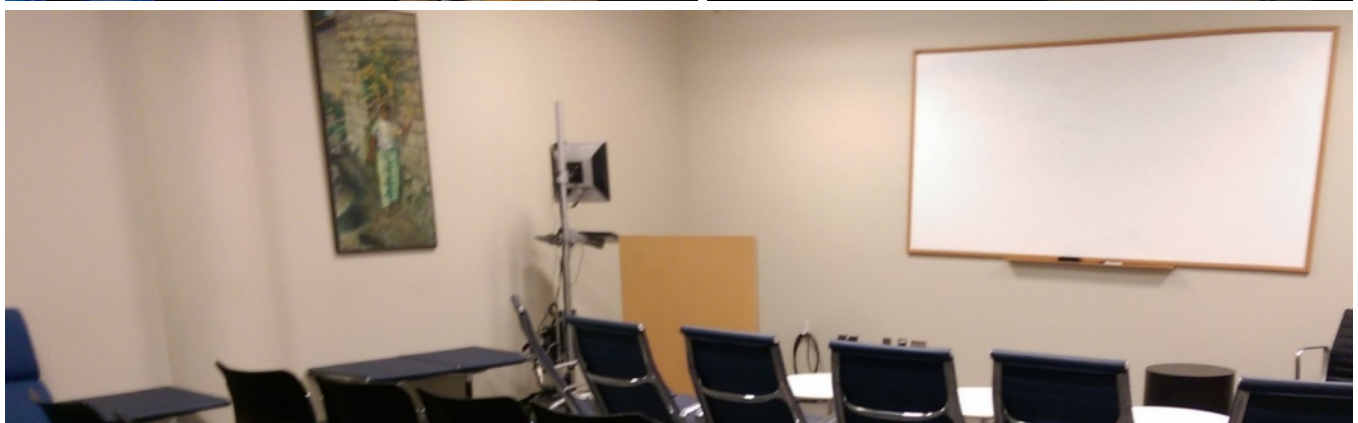
When I came to UCLA in the fall of 2016, I worked with faculty, staff, and students across various departments to develop programming with a conversational focus. The initiative was partly triggered by a comment made by Chris Johanson (at UCLA) who suggested I bring the experimental model of my other events to a new seminar series (UCLA Digital Humanities).

Conventional events – especially conferences and symposiums – tend to have limited time for conversation in the program. At most conferences time is a limited resource (especially for Q&A's) as a result of the way the program is structured. There is a very legitimate need to fit many (titled) talks/presentations into the program. Because so much value is attributed to having and holding onto time, not even the allotted time for conversation can be used fully or effectively.

The time at hand gets shaped by power structures, expectations on performance, and a frequent lack of sharp moderation, which means that the time for open and content-driven dialogue gets reduced even further.

Simple thing 10.4: Control time to encourage conversation in accordance with the grounding of the event.

Additionally, the space and infrastructure in most venues are typically designed for information delivery and display or presentation rather than for conversation. Consider the single screen and the forward-facing visual attention in most lecture spaces.



Again, seating arrangements are a question of capacity (fitting people), but not solely. We are shaped by our infrastructure and conventions. So when we implemented the UCLA DH seminar in 2016 we changed some of the parameters around “the seminar,” but not all. Emphasizing conversation rather than presentation, we invited several participants to each event rather than one speaker. Also, there were no distinct presentation slots and the use of slides was conditioned (no slides, or in some cases, a few slides). The time frame for each seminar was extensive (2 hours, or at least 90 minutes). However, we did not change the use of the space in the same way.



UCLA DH Seminar Dec 9, 2016 on “Encoding Diversity” with Ursula Heise, Safiya Umoja Noble, Geoffrey Bowker, Élika Ortega and Todd Presner. Photo credit: Patrik Svensson.

We placed the invited participants at the front of the room (on stage) along an oblong table in a panel format. This worked reasonably well. The conversationalists are easy to see for everyone and the arrangement helps focus the conversation. However, the panel format comes with certain expectations (see above), all of which are not conversational. Also, the invited speakers cannot really see each other really well (even though people adjust to see each other – see photos above and below). Additionally, seeing content on the screen often difficult for those in conversation, requiring the speakers to turn their backs to the audience or crane their necks. The setup creates a clear division between the invited participants (“panelists”) and the rest of

the participants in the “audience.”



Given the venues we used for the seminar series it might have been difficult to things differently, but perhaps not impossible. We could have asked about other possible configurations in those spaces or tried to find other venues. Sometimes the space and infrastructure help you along. When I started to organize events at KTH in 2017 and 2018, I came across some new spaces, and one of them – the Open Lab – helped us experiment with the format. We used this space for the [Making Change through the Humanities: Institutes, Ideas and Infrastructures](#) conference in 2018, and found it useful for pair conversations and for carrying out an experimental workshop.



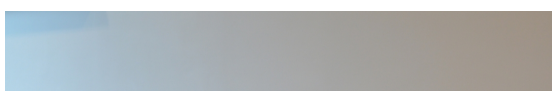
Later, in a series of events carried out in 2019, we moved the conversation from the upfront stage position to the floor so to speak. For the [Digital Humanities Stockholm event in March 2019](#) (carried out with Danielle Morgan and the National Library of Sweden), there was a long session on the landscape of digital humanities in Stockholm and Sweden. I had asked three groups of participants to be involved: (1) early career scholars and artists, (2) heads of university libraries and (3) representatives of national cultural heritage institutions. Instead of creating a sequential panel-like situation, I let the invited groups be seated in the room amongst one another. This change in format resulted from earlier reflections on the weaknesses of the panel model for conversations and because the venue we used had round tables as a default setup.



Photo from a Digital Humanities Stockholm event, 2019. Photo credit: Danielle Morgan.

An open space with round tables (if you have enough area for this setup) is excellent for breaking down barriers, not least between invited participants/speakers and audience/attendees. People will have to turn to face the speaker, but if you are not reliant on slides and if you use hand-held wireless microphones, there is little risk that people will miss out on the conversation. Moving a conversation between tables becomes much easier and dynamic than moving it from a podium to rows of seats. A moderator can easily move between round tables. Auditorium seating restricts movement to aisles making it extremely difficult for discussion curators to reach audience/participants with a microphone to amplify their voice for the discussion.

The new format at the Digital Humanities Stockholm event was successful in helping us achieve our goals for a dynamic exchange across the invited groups. The three tables first had about 20 minutes each for conversations, which I moderated (everyone else was listening in, for a slightly different version of this approach, see Mead 1958). We built in time for open conversation between these sessions and also after the three conversations within the schedule. Enough time creates both opportunity and expectations for interaction.



Having three groups (tables) talk among themselves first before opening up the conversation was very useful. For example, university libraries are not always part of conversations relating

to digital humanities and cultural heritage, and everyone present got to listen in to an open conversation between heads of university libraries (I had asked everyone beforehand not to do institutional presentations). The dialog aired challenges and included a productive combination of reflections that are often underrepresented both within discipline-specific and interdisciplinary academic conference settings.

Academic events should not be too “one note”, and for example, the Digital Humanities Stockholm event described above also included brief talks and presentations (mainly in a second block devoted to interaction design).

11. Getting started

How do you get started organizing an event? This section complements the rest of this document through focusing on the process of initiating events. It covers some key issues and perspectives, but is not meant to be all inclusive. Rather it mostly retains the focus on curated, intermediate-sized events, but also brings up other perspectives, including seminars/seminar series and annual, serialized events. Hopefully this section will be useful to people interested in creating events, not least early career scholars and experts.

The Effort

Organizing events can be very beneficial (experience, networking, steering the intellectual agenda of an institution or a field), but keep in mind that organizing events is also time consuming and a major commitment. It can be useful to speak to people who have organized events and/or department heads or others in leadership positions (ideally they can help and provide resources).

Simple thing 11.1: Consider the effort required to organize an event as well as the intended benefits and gains before making a final commitment.

The Topic

The most obvious starting point is to have an idea about a topic, need, conversation or participants: Something to explore, say, stage or challenge. This ‘something’ can be small and detailed, or extensive and capacious, but should make people interested and excited about the event. It needs to have some form of novelty to be interesting, but should probably stay away from what is currently trending unless the event can make a significant and meaningful contribution. The organizer also needs to make sure that there has not been previous (or planned) events that have covered the topic, and if there are related events, it helps to point out how the new event builds off these and how it distinguishes itself.

Because my interest primarily lies in issues that reach across areas, I tend to engage with topics that can perhaps be best described as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989, Svensson

2016). These need to be broad enough to attract different types of participants, but sharp enough not to be too meaningless. They often emerge in conversation with others and – for me – tend to be built around a few initial participants. I normally keep the original theme somewhat loose to allow it to develop as the event planning progresses and more people get attached.

Teamwork

Putting together a team to help arrange an event is a key task. Such teams can be very small or fairly large. I have worked with teams of about 20 people as well as with one other person. I have also experienced large-scale, industrial events with very large crews. Since I moved to the US in 2015, I have mostly had valuable but small-scale institutional support. For me, having someone to work closely with on the formation an event is central, and if possible, I prefer working with the same person on several events. More largely, it is important to connect staff from various spaces where events are held with students, involved departments, and outside help and support. As a considerable coordination task, it is worthwhile to build long-term relationships with individual and institutional partners where you are organizing the event.

Simple thing 11.2: Put together a strong event team and build long-term connections with staff, institutions and collaborators.

Invited Participants

Securing between one to three invited participants early on is often a good starting point. These participants need not be “stars” (and perhaps they should not be), but their work needs be interesting enough to attract others to the event. The choice of participants is a central curatorial task, not necessarily the task of an individual, but ultimately the responsibility of the curator/s. When being in touch with potential participants it helps to indicate (honest) interest in their work and suggest ways in which it connects to the theme of the event. Also, do not forgot to tell them what you think they can get out of the event.

Simple thing 11.3: Make sure to tell invited participants both what you think they can contribute to the event and what they may get out of being involved.

Bear in mind that all early decisions about invited participants and other matters will contribute to the making of the event and manifest its approach and grounding. For example, make sure to approach women as well as men, engage early-career scholars from the beginning, and look beyond established networks (which is easier said than done) when inviting participants.

Simple thing 11.4: Let the grounding and values of the event inform the event planning from the very beginning.

Once there is a general topic and a few people who have shown interest, it is a good time to put together a fuller brief and framing of the event (1-3 pages). This brief can be used for discussing the event further and for securing funding, and later, when contacting additional potential invited participants. It will also likely be the backbone of the event website.

Space, Format and Infrastructure

One of the benefits of the curated, medium-sized event is that it can be relatively flexible. It is not embedded in the mechanisms of large-scale annual events and it is not as brief (or small) as a seminar or a single session. The medium size makes it possible to support one-track collaborative building of knowledge, networks and results over the course of one or several days. Furthermore, because organizers do not deal with hundreds of participants, it is easier to find venues close to the “operation” (no need to be at a displaced conference hotel) and also to move between localities.

Simple thing 11.5: Look carefully at potential venues for the event, and also beyond the standard choices (consider other parts of the campus, collaboration with centers or institutes, and meaningful venues outside the university). Using several spaces – and moving between them – can be an advantage. I often schedule the morning in one space and the afternoon in another space, and try to connect content to the space and infrastructure.

There is a kind of calibration that needs to take place between ideas, a rough concept for the event, invited participants (and later signed-up attendees), available venues and infrastructure, the flow of an imagined and emergent conversations and engagement, and different programmatic elements. Managing this calibration is the responsibility for the curator/s in collaboration with staff, project groups and external experts. While there are set building blocks for academic events, there is also flexibility and room for experimentation.

Simple thing 11.6: Do not feel restricted by conventional ways of carrying out academic events and programmatic templates. Consider different types of program slots, mixes, modes of engagement (also beyond the discursive), media, technology use and flows. Be creative, grounded, practical and attentive at the same time!

The infrastructure of conventional event spaces is often set, but also seen as being set. There are ways such infrastructure can be adapted and tweaked, e.g. through adding a screen, using mobile equipment, or moving furniture around. Moreover, other types of venues can be used depending on the needs of the event and the topic. Many university campuses will have architecture and design studios, performance spaces, signature spaces (historical, curious and perhaps not generally seen as available) and other venues.

Simple thing 11.7: Show respect and interest when engaging with facility managers and potential institutional partners. Make sure to give credit and to bring in partners (e.g. through

including a short presentation from the “owner” of the space etc.).

Margaret Mead discusses food and drinks at some length in her book on the small conference. Recently, I have offered only vegetarian options at a few events. The reason has been that it was simpler, but also that it challenges the conventional format somewhat.

“

The conference banquet at [#nordmedia2019](#) last night was 100% vegetarian (no meat or fish options at all) and absolutely delicious. All conferences should be this environmentally-minded! Sets a powerful example. Chanterelles on toast celery root with polenta and kale chips



— Jill Walker Rettberg (@jilltxt) [August 23, 2019](#)

”

At some events in the lab, staff went for only-vegetarian options, which took me a while to get used to, but made a great deal of sense.

Microphones and Audio

Audio plays an important role. Wireless or lavalier microphones are useful if you wish change the room set up between sessions. Microphones should be used unless the room is very small or the cost prohibitive.

Simple thing 11.8: Use microphones and make sure everyone uses them.

“

Friendly (but critical) conference reminder: ALWAYS use the microphone. It's an accessibility issue. Don't ask the audience if it's OK not to – that requires people with disabilities to publically self-identify when they may not wish to. Let's stop seeing inclusion as optional.

— Dr Lucy Mercer-Mapstone (@LucyMercerMaps) [July 16, 2019](#)

”

Mercer-Mapstone, Lucy. 2019.

Ideally there should be several microphones depending on the event and space. I usually try to make sure there is at least one to two handheld microphones, one-two lavalier microphones (for longer presentations) and stationary ones (for panels and the podium if there is one). The need to use microphones at all times needs to be stressed (also for conversations, Q&A's etc.).

Some participants may try to opt out saying that their voice carries across the room “no problem” or that they do not feel comfortable using a microphone. People frequently overestimate their voices and the point is that there may be participants who do not hear as well as others (or hear differently). Also, as Mercer-Mapstone (2019) emphasizes, the audience/participants should not be asked whether it is okay not to use microphones.

Using microphones also helps signal where the event is at right now, which is particularly important in a conversational session or when there are several things going on at the same time.

Payment, reimbursement etc.

Should invited participants be paid? This is a complex and contentious issue that in my opinion depends on the type of event, national context, types of participants and available resources. There is a difference between an industry event run at profit and a graduate-student organized workshop. There is also a difference between an instrumental visit where the invited person does a series of things for the host, including perhaps even doing the same workshop twice, and a visit that was designed to give the invited person a great deal back and/or where there is a forward trajectory in terms of collaboration, exchange, projects or networks. Furthermore, there is a difference between inviting a well-established faculty and an early-career artist or professional person (for whom the event is not core business, and where they will have lose “work hours” to participate the event).

For the mid-sized event, the hosting organization should cover as much of the costs as possible (accommodation, hotel, dinner etc.), not charge a fee (if possible) and take really good care of all participants, but there would normally not be remuneration for invited participants. The event offers content, networks and an opportunity to move forward in terms of scholarship, and participation will primarily be based on such a synergistic model. Invited participants invest their time and the host organization covers as much of the other costs as possible.

Let me also note that most academics accept that annual, serialized events (e.g. the annual Modern Language Association conference) charge a substantial fee for attendance and that speakers (with few exceptions) also pay that fee and that they do not get any kind of remuneration. Such events are costly for participants, regardless of whether they are a presenter or not. Keynotes are usually treated differently, but not always. I am not arguing that this is a good model, but rather that it is an established model (that can perhaps be changed).

“

And those in precarious financial circumstances can find that

”

membership fee truly burdensome. Grad students and adjuncts are told that SCMS membership and conference attendance illustrates their commitment to the profession. What are we saying to those who can't afford it?

— Lindsey Decker 🙄 (@ldecker_phd) [July 9, 2019](#)

Some conferences offer a sliding scale depending on your position in the academy. Others connect the fee to income of the participants (e.g. the MLA conference). Sometimes there will be stipends for graduate students or early career scholars.

“

Last thing I would add: [@NCTE_CCCC](#) offers a reduced rate for adjunct instructors for their conference registration fee. We do not see this nearly enough across conferences.

— Erin Doran 🍀🍀 (@ErinDoran_EdD) [September 6, 2019](#)

”

Presumably the rationale is that the fee will cover the cost for the event and that the event offers opportunities worth the cost. In fact, many of such events are institutional in the sense of being a meeting place for a community every year, where networking, job interviews and meetings take place. They also offer presentation/paper spots that build professional CVs.

Seminar and lecture series are in between the serialized event and the mid-sized event in my experience. When the seminar series is highly instrumental and part of what the institution normally does, it may be reasonable with a monetary compensation, more so in some countries than others. There are also various other aspects to factor into the planning of such a series, for example inviting independent scholars and adjunct faculty.

“

As you're sending out queries to invite speakers to your campuses for the coming AY, consider reaching out to adjunct faculty and independent scholars with these kinds of opportunities. Consider using your funding to further the research of those without dedicated research funds.

”

— Sarah Rebecca Kessler (@moveablejaw) [July 16, 2019](#)

There are also seminar series where it makes less sense to offer general fees (depending on the budget), especially if the series is experimental, not instrumental, dialogic (rather than presentational) and/or connected to other matters (projects, collaboration etc.).

In my experience, it is important to be as transparent as possible with regards to fees and costs. Bring the situation and conditions up at an early stage. Treat everyone the same way, but also be sensitive to individual conditions. In my professional experience, we have rarely paid invited participants, but of course there have been exceptions.

Simple thing 11.9: Be as transparent as possible about fees, costs and the model of the event.

Regardless, the organizing institution should try to cover the travel and accommodation costs for as many invited participants as possible (and registered participants if there are enough resources). It is strongly preferable in my view that these costs are paid upfront by the institution rather than using a reimbursement process. Additionally (and this is a more general point), home institutions should also not do reimbursements, but pay costs directly whenever possible.

“

Academic reimbursement policies and procedures are part of the racist and classist structure of academia. Add this to the list of things wrong w/ reimbursement. <https://t.co/g2v5M17HUd>

— Minh-Ha T. Pham (@minh81) [February 18, 2019](#)

”

Reimbursement tends to be very slow, administratively heavy and hit early career and less privileged participants more.

Simple thing 11.10: Pay costs for flights, hotels etc. directly rather than requiring invited participants (and employees) to go through a reimbursement procedure.

Reimbursements also hand over the responsibility to the participant, rather than allowing the organizers to manage these matters. For example, it is very useful for organizers to have control over the itineraries of invited participants and be able to make changes as needed.

Notes on seminars and serialized conferences

Academic events come in many different shapes and forms. See below for a discussion of seminar/seminar series and serialized, annual conferences.

Seminars and seminar series. Most departments and centers run at least one seminar or talk series. These are organized in different ways, but often a chair or professor will have the main responsibility. Early career scholars (including Ph.D students) interested in bringing in people and organizing events can try to use a seminar series as a platform – individually or as a group. Approach the seminar leader and ask whether you could be responsible for organizing one or two seminars next semester or academic year, and give a suggestion about content and people. Make sure that there are resources allocated before taking on a commitment, or alternatively, work towards securing funding.

My experience is that it is often taken positively to approach several institutions with interest in a potential speaker and that they may be willing to contribute part of the cost. Credit should be given to sponsors, and it can often be useful to co-list a seminar as part of several series at the same time. While done relatively rarely at universities, it can help take down walls, forge connections and attract a larger number of participants. It may take some convincing in relation to your own department, however. If you do not get traction at your department, you can also approach centers or other departments to see if they are interested in hosting your event/s. Some centers are event-rich and may be delighted to be the host, also for individual talks.

Simple thing 11.11: Departments and centers can invite early-career scholars to organize seminars or seminar series. At the Department of Information Studies at UCLA (where I was for several years), the seminar series (the colloquium) is led by Ph.D students. In such cases, the early-career scholars should have/be given integrity, and it is also important that departments provides support and mentorship.

Annual, serialized conferences. Usually, there exists a procedure for submitting bids for annual or bi-annual serialized conferences. These events are often big and run by scholarly associations. Reservations for a venue/place will usually have to be submitted two or more years in advance. If successful, there will normally be a local organizing committee whose mandate is given by the organization in question. There will also (hopefully) be some infrastructure in place (e.g. for managing registrations, peer review of proposals etc.).

Organizing a large serialized event is a great deal of work and will often require access to substantial local support. This task can normally not be carried out by an individual, but needs to be an institutional effort at least at some level. Furthermore, there is usually limited freedom to shape the event in that there are a lot of “givens” – regarding the format etc. – and because the local committee is not fully in charge of the event (depends on the organizational structure however). The themes tend to be broad and largely nominal, or at least not cohesive across the conference.

Organizing such an event gives the local organizer credit in the organization, increases visibility

and supports network building. As noted, it is also a major undertaking. In some cases, a local organizer can use a serialized event to make a point about the field, suggest new directions or engage local perspectives and expertise – which would seem to make it more worthwhile to be an organizer. I am reminded of Jonathan Sterne’s discussion about when it makes most sense to be the editor of an edited volume: essentially if you are interested in changing or defining the field (Sterne 2011). During my time in HUMlab, we only submitted one bid (unsuccessful) for a serialized conference, and in this case we suggested a joint venture between the ADHO and HASTAC conferences because we thought there would be benefits and emergent themes based on closer collaboration between the two organizations.

12. Pandemic Notes and Two Experiments (2021-2022)

In April 2022 I met with colleagues at UCLA on campus and one of them told me that he had essentially not been on campus since the event we organized on March 9-10, 2020. After that event UCLA was closed down and remote activities took over. I left the US early April 2020 and returned for six weeks in September. During this time I moved back to Sweden and was based in Uppsala and focused on other things than curating events. This is the time when Zoom (and some other tools) largely took over academic communication. At one point I wrote an email to the CEO of Zoom with some suggestions, but unsurprisingly never got a reply. I took part in a few events carried out using such platform, but had no reason to organize anything at this point in time.

I missed not curating events, both because it is something I really enjoy doing as it is part of my practice, but also I felt it was necessary to move forward on network building, implementing ideas and engaging people in conversation. During this time (2021-2022) I initiated two experiments, both of which challenged my curatorial skills and my preconceptions about experimenting with formats. They were very different and a great learning experiments.

The backdrop consisted of two interconnected projects: 1) a research project I carried out while a fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study where I among other things looked at pandemic and climate-change responses in relation to serialized conferences and 2) my ongoing work on facilitating humanistic and humane capacity for collaboratively responding to challenges and problems.

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