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Spaced Out: My Adventures at the 2007 IWCA Conference

by Michael Mattison

That’s right, you’re not from Texas,  
But Texas wants you anyway.  
—Lyle Lovett

April 5

One week. One week until I leave for Houston and the International Writing Center Association Conference. I’ve been singing Texas-themed songs for the past few days, anticipating the trip. I’ve never been to the conference before, and I’m excited. Three days chock full of writing center theories, practices, ideas, issues, conversations; three days associating with people who do the same type of work that I do. Every few hours I log into the conference web site and browse the program—there are so many interesting panels listed, so many people I want to talk with, listen to, learn from. I’ve put a mental asterisk near a couple of the sessions, but I’m not yet at the point where I can draw out a full schedule for myself. But, I am at the point where I’m ready to go.

April 6

Maybe I’m not quite ready. I should probably finish my own presentation first. The proposal I submitted focused on ethnopoetic notation, which is a practice often used in folklore in order to display Native American stories on the page and one that I think can be a way of analyzing the talk between consultant and writer. I read about the practice in a Bonnie Sunstein article, and then found some work by Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes that described it in more detail. Quite simply (and I know I’m reworking the practice to my own ends), I’m suggesting that we can take the talk between writer and consultant and turn it into poetry. That poetry can then offer us some new insights into our conversations. At least that’s what I said in my

About the Author

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proposal. And, I do have overheads of some poems that my consultants wrote that I will argue highlight important elements of their conversations with writers.

So, I know what I'll talk about, which is a good thing, and I've done most of my background reading, which is also a good thing. I don't, though, have a complete outline for my talk. Nor have I finished researching. Sounds like my weekend plans are set.

April 9

The theme for the conference is “Space,” and the call for papers emphasized that idea in many ways:

- Writing centers are also “places of infinite possibilities,” or are they? In thinking about our writing center work, how does the rhetorical notion of space and place define our writing center ethos, the work we do, the people we serve, the theories we create, and the spaces we inhabit?
- Right now I'm realizing that the most important space is that which is not in my suitcase. I much prefer to have carry-on luggage only, but I also worry about my suitcase fitting in the overhead luggage container. In laying out my clothes and books, I'm thinking that my airport reading list will be determined not so much by topic as by book size.

April 10

I'm pretty sure I had a dream last night about my presentation. Namely, that I spent twenty minutes discussing ethnopoetic notation and then did not show any examples. I somehow forgot to use any of the overheads I so carefully made. At least that's what I think happened. I have a tendency not to remember much of my dreams. There are hints of what happened, vague notions of situations and experiences. When I remember a dream, it's more like remembering a feeling than anything else. This time it was a feeling of disappointment, realizing, “Oh, I forgot to show this, which was the main point.” I'm not certain what this foreshadows for my presentation, but I am considering opening with the overheads.

April 11

7:04 a.m. MST

Why is it that on the day I travel the newspaper has a headline reading, “Fatigue threatens air safety”? I first worried that I wasn't rested enough to fly to Houston, but I found out that the worry is that air traffic controllers don't get enough sleep. They're often scheduled for two eight-hour shifts within a twenty-four hour window. Great. Now I'm going to have to be extra cautious on the plane and watch out for other aircraft.
I'm not especially thrilled about flying anyway, and I know it's probably a matter of control: meaning, when I fly I have little control over things and that bothers me. I don't like to be in cars when someone else is driving, either.

I'm also worrying about the weather, specifically the 30-degree shift in temperature. It's 50 in Boise today, but 80 in Houston. Actually, I'm quite worried about the Houston weather. It was 39 two days ago, 55 yesterday, and it will be 83 today. I figure at that rate it will hit 120 by the weekend. Now I can probably pack all my books as I won't need many clothes.

11:44 a.m. MST

In the skies above Idaho. I am on the lookout for other planes.

5:54 p.m. CST

The air traffic controllers must have had enough sleep because we didn't come within miles of another plane; plus, there was a tailwind from Salt Lake City to Houston so we arrived a half-hour early. That just about made up for sitting in the last row of the plane, a row in which the seats do not recline. Also, the plane was temperature-challenged. It was freezing up front, and sauna-like in the back. I suppose I could have stayed reasonably comfortable by walking up and down the aisle, but it wasn't that big a plane and I do doubt would have annoyed the flight crew.

6:31 p.m. CST

Wow. The conference hotel is remarkable, and that's not brochure-speak. It just feels classy, with the little details taken care of. Even the name, The Magnolia Hotel, slides off the tongue with the ease of an acrobat after a few too many vodkas. The lobby is wood floors and giant columns, with lights embedded into the flooring. I could imagine some sort of fashion show here, with models strutting around the outside of the columns as reporters and fashion experts sit circled within, watching for the latest hem line. I also imagine that if I dropped a wrapper, someone would swoop in and grasp it before it hit the floor. There's that unspoken pressure of cleanliness. On one wall is a fireplace, with big circles of leather in front of it—they are not quite chairs, not quite stools, but some strange hybrid that look both inviting and dangerous. To one side of the fireplace is a large sign announcing the IWCA conference, with an arrow pointing straight up, indicating that registration is on the third floor.

The rooms themselves are impressive. The shower is over a deep tub (perfect for a bubble bath), and the shower curtain is dual, meaning it has an inner waterproof liner and an outer towel-like side. No more standing in the shower with one flimsy curtain that wraps itself up around your ankles as you try to keep water from...
flooding the bathroom floor. And there is an impressive array of small bottles in the bathroom containing all sorts of important fluids: shampoo, body gel, conditioner, and moisturizing cream. Even better, there are touches of bright color on the labels. If you line them up, it's like having a mini-Picasso in the bathroom. The room itself has a large desk in one corner, a sitting chair in another, a comfortable-looking bed, and a bureau designed to hold a television while looking as if it was not designed to hold a television. I'm always intrigued when the fancier hotels hide the TV sets, tucking them away as if to say that, yes, we acknowledge that some of you might partake of such pedestrian activities, but we will not flaunt the fact that we offer them to you. I immediately open up the bureau and see if they offer HBO (they don't).

Some of the opulence, though, comes with a price. For instance, there are fancy bottles of water on the room tables, and I'm just about to wash away the long travel day when I happen to read the room menu. It seems that drinking from the tap will save me three bucks. The bottle placement was a little unethical, I think. There is a mini-bar, and that distinctly says that anything removed from the fridge will be charged to your room account. There's no sign like that near the water. I wonder how many people have opened the bottle and then been charged. How many complained? How many were reimbursed? And, is any bottle of water really worth three dollars?

6:48 p.m. CST

I've spent the last fifteen minutes with the vanity mirror in the bathroom. It's a circle, about ten inches across, and there's a little switch on the cord that turns on the light. When you peer into the circle, you can see every pore on your face in minute detail. This is not necessarily a good thing, but it is fascinating. I'm not sure I've ever been able to see so far into my nostrils, and I'm beginning to make out some interesting abstract patterns in my eyebrows. To make the obvious comparison: maybe this conference is a little like the mirror. This is a chance for me, a writing center person, to examine my work and my pedagogy with more rigor than usual. I just hope the whole experience is not as strange as looking at my earlobes, which I now think are slightly different sizes.

Thursday, April 12
5:14 a.m. CST

There is Starbucks coffee in the room, little packets that fit into the small coffee machine on the counter. I've read every piece of paper in the room, and I cannot find any that mention a charge for this coffee, so I'm going to risk it and brew some.
8:00 a.m. CST
THE CONFERENCE BEGINS! YEA!

9:24 a.m. CST
There's a certain energy flowing around the third floor as everyone is switching rooms between sessions, and I'm trying to think of a word to describe the crowd I see milling about. One word keeps coming to mind and I am desperately trying to push it back. It's not the right word, or maybe it is but I don't want to say it, or think it, or write it...oh, heck, “grandmotherly.” That's what I'm thinking. I see many people who could possibly be grandmothers. But it's more than an age/gender thing, because I'm also thinking of a grandmother as smart and dedicated and kind. Those are not bad qualities. And would it be so bad to be thought of as grandmotherly? Couldn't I aspire to grandmotherliness? Shouldn't I? There is an awful lot to admire about my grandmothers—they are generous, they listen well, they are giving and caring and concerned. All those qualities go towards writing center work. We look for such people to be consultants and directors. Maybe we are a bunch of grandmothers. I'm beginning to think there would be nothing wrong with that.

10:56 a.m. CST
Further proof that this is a classy hotel can be found in the third-floor men's room. The faucets in there, rather than having spouts, have flat surfaces upon which the water rolls forward, eventually waterfalling over the edge and onto your hands. It's a Frank Lloyd Wright type of thing, simple and stunning. And the paper towels in here are thick, wonderfully absorbent. I think I'm going to get my hands dirty again so that I can come back.

1:44 p.m. CST
It just occurred to me that one way to attend a conference like IWCA would be to stay in the same session room. There are about eight rooms on the third floor, and I realize that I could have just chosen one and sat through all of the panels scheduled for that room. Instead of wandering around from room to room, choosing panels, I could just sit and let the conference come to me. I bet I would have just as interesting a conference experience as I am having now—and that's not saying that what I'm choosing is bad, but rather that there are so many good panels that any room would offer up something worthwhile. I think I might have to try this at my next conference. I'm going to call it “sedentary participation.”
3:10 p.m. CST

Were I a sponge, I would be unable to hold more water at this point. The sessions I’ve attended have been provocative, thoughtful, and fun. I haven’t agreed with everyone, but I didn’t expect to. My notebook is covered with notes and symbols and diagrams and references. I hope that I’ll somehow be able to decipher it all when I’m back home. I’m also hoping I can continue on coherently for the next two sessions. This might be extremely difficult as I’ve just found out that there is no afternoon coffee service.

8:51 p.m. CST

I assume that people go out in the evening at conferences and, probably, if I wanted to capture the full feeling of this conference, I should find some way to socialize after 7 p.m. But I’m not much of an evening guy. There was a dinner cruise possibility, but I didn’t sign up. Instead, I’m waiting on someone named Frank to bring me a pizza and I’m trying to decide if I should really open the mini-bar for a five-dollar can of beer. I also want to go over my presentation one more time—as soon as this episode of Law and Order finishes.

9:33 p.m. CST

I seem to have forgotten my notes. Going through my folder for my talk tomorrow, I realize that I have the handouts and the overheads, and copies of some of the articles I’m citing. What I don’t have are the four pages of notes that outlined my talk. They include a few choice quotations that I hoped to read to people. There is a mild rise in blood pressure when I realize the absence. I double-check my briefcase, look in my suitcase, and check under the bed. Nope. They didn’t make the trip. Somehow I think that I might have sent an old copy of the notes to myself on email, sending from home to work in order to add some information from books at school. If so, the notes wouldn’t have all my final thoughts, but it would still give me the basics. I hope the hotel library is still open, and I hope the rest of the writing center folks are out on the town so the computer is free.

10:02 p.m. CST

Library was open; computer was free; old notes were stored on email.

Friday, April 13

7:11 a.m. CST

Talking through my presentation one more time. I’m improvising more in this presentation rather than reading off the page. It’s always a tricky balance for me, how much to read to an audience, how much to speak from notes. I find it very difficult to make a compelling, engaging talk from a prepared paper. That takes work.
I was really impressed with Phil Gardner (from Francis Marion) yesterday, as he made his paper seem familiar and engaging. I'd sit and listen to Phil's southern accent and Flannery O'Connor references for most of a day.

7:34 a.m. CST

I always get the sniffles just before a presentation. Is that a nervous reaction? I think it's probably good that there are some nerves—there is an excitement, an energy to this. I'm looking forward to talking on this topic. I think it's interesting; I think it's valuable to me and my consultants; I want to share the information. But I am trying to drain part of the excess energy off by double-checking everything in the room: the overhead works, my handouts are in order, my glass of water is ready, the thermostat looks all right, the window hinges are oiled, the chairs are aligned, the ceiling tiles are evenly spaced. My other presenters have not yet arrived yet, but it's still early. I think I'm going to go check out the water faucets in the bathroom again.

7:51 a.m. CST

How many people do you need in a room for a successful session? Is that a fair way to count? Probably not, as it reduces an intellectual endeavor down to a numbers game. I don't like to consider a talk in that way, and I think that I should present to a room of one the same way I present to a room of thirty (at least in terms of energy and engagement). I feel the same way about writing workshops at school—the one person who shows up should not be penalized because I was expecting more people.

At the moment, though, I'm going to be talking to myself. There are no audience members, and no other presenters. Hmmm, maybe that dinner cruise took its toll.

7:56 a.m. CST

OK, some people are arriving. I will not be talking to myself.

8:12 a.m. CST

This seems a relatively tough crowd. I'm looking for smiles and nods as I talk, chuckles when I make what I think is a joke. There are some responses, but there are also some poker faces. The folks behind them are either deeply engrossed in the idea of ethnopoetic notation, or they are wondering again what might be the best use of the tax refund that should be arriving in the mail any day now.

Obviously I'm much too self-conscious about these presentations. I don't always separate myself from myself, instead hovering over my shoulder, critiquing, checking, analyzing. I keep wondering if I'm making sense, if the material is interesting.
And there are some names here—people who have sat on the IWCA board, people who have written books and articles that I have used in class or in my own writing. There is one in particular who seems difficult to impress, and I find myself willing her to have a reaction. “Come on,” I think, “Smile!” “Nod!” Can I get an “Amen!”? And then, something. She raises her head slightly and seems to flare her nostrils just a bit, a small puff of air released, as if in agreement to a point I've made. I take it as a positive.

9:16 a.m. CST

The talk is over, and there is that sense of the successfully completed project, the luxuriousness of being finished. I imagine that I might have the same expression on my face as Lincoln, one of the kids on my son’s baseball team, which I help coach. During our first game, Lincoln came up to bat. On the fourth pitch, he managed to make contact and send the ball towards third. He ran down the line, beat out the throw, and then looked up at me with a big smile: “That was fun!” he said.

The panel was fun. And now that my formal contribution to the conference is done, I can sit back, choose more sessions, enjoy the luncheon, and just soak in the Houston sunshine and the writing center conversations. I'll have no worries until the plane ride home, when once again I'll have to check out the windows just in case those air-traffic controllers haven't been getting enough sleep.

Saturday, April 14
12:43 p.m. MST

The cloud cover over Texas from my first flight has changed to clear skies over Utah and Idaho for the second. Below me, the mountains stand regally, their snow-capped peaks postcard-perfect in the early afternoon. It’s too early, certainly, to say what I’ll take from the conference, but watching the mountains below suggests that I just made a similar trip pedagogically. I had a flyover of writing center work, a chance to step back from my own center and see the field (in some ways) all at once. I had a chance to peer down from an altitude and notice how each center and each director, administrator, and consultant stands together, a landscape of writers and responders.
NOTES

1 I admit some authorial license here, as I obviously did not take these notes at this time; I was in the middle of my presentation. But I did have these thoughts, so I am putting them down as to time of thinking, rather than recording.

WORKS CITED

