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Capacitating Community: The Writing Innovation Symposium

Jenn Fishman

Abigayle Farrier

Aleisha R. Balestri

Barbara Clauer

Bump Halbritter

See next page for additional authors

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Capacitating Community: The Writing Innovation Symposium

Authors

Jenn Fishman, Abigayle Farrier, Aleisha R. Balestri, Barbara Clauer, Bump Halbritter, Darci Thoune, Derek G. Handley, Gitte Frandsen, Holly Burgess, Lillian Campbell, Liz Angeli, Louise Zamparutti, Jenna Green, Jennifer Kontny, Jessica R. Edwards, Jessie Wirkus Haynes, Julie Lindquist, Kaia L. Simon, Kayla Urban Fetting, Kelsey Otero, Margaret Perrow, Maria Novotny, Marie Cleary-Fishman, Maxwell Gray, Melissa Kaplan, Patrick W. Thomas, Paul Feigenbaum, Sara Heaser, and Seán McCarthy

Project and Program Profiles

Capacitating Community: The Writing Innovation Symposium

Jenn Fishman with Abigail Farrier, Aleisha R. Balestri, Barbara Clauer, Bump Halbritter, Darci Thoun, Derek G. Handley, Gitte Frandsen, Holly Burgess, Lillian Campbell, Liz Angeli, Louise Zamparutti, Jenna Green, Jennifer Kontny, Jessica R. Edwards, Jessie Wirkus Haynes, Julie Lindquist, Kaia L. Simon, Kayla Urban Fettig, Kelsey Otero, Margaret Perrow, Maria Novotny, Marie Cleary-Fishman, Maxwell Gray, Melissa Kaplan, Patrick W. Thomas, Paul Feigenbaum, Sara Heaser, and Seán McCarthy

Abstract

The topic of this symposium, capacitating community, invites *CLJ* readers to consider what makes community possible. This piece showcases one means, small conferences, via a retrospective on the Writing Innovation Symposium (WIS), a regional event with national scope that has hosted writers and writing educators annually in Milwaukee, WI, since 2018. Through a quilted conversation pieced from hours of small-group discussion, twenty-nine participants across academic and nonacademic ranks, roles, and ranges of experience offer insight into the WIS as well as the nature and value of professional community.

Keywords: capacity building, community, conference, innovation, professional community, symposium, writing, writing education

Introduction

Jenn Fishman

The Writing Innovation Symposium (WIS) is a regional meeting with national reach that welcomes participants annually to balmy, mid-winter Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My role is Chief Capacitator. It's a nonce title given to me by Seán McCarthy, and its story is signature WIS. The occasion was a manuscript workshop that featured an article-in-progress by Seán and Paul Feigenbaum. Like other WIS programming, including plenary presentations, five-minute flashtalks,¹ and research displays, the workshop was, above all, an occasion for co-work. That day, our small

but representative group included not only faculty and graduate students but also a university arts outreach coordinator, Melissa Kaplan, and a hospital association administrator, Marie Cleary-Fishman. Then, as always, we discussed, and we engaged one another through discussion. We wrote independently and together. We ate—and ate well—and it happened: there was synergy and serendipity, invention and innovation, and among so many other things, Seán put words to the role I play as steward of it all.

The WIS itself rose phoenix-like from the ashes of my university's writing program, which was eliminated while the symposium was in planning stages. From the start, Marquette University's Social Innovation Initiative anchored the WIS, and the University Libraries provided the primary location. The writing program, First-Year English, was to be the compass, guiding whatever directions the symposium might take. I was WPA at the time, and I co-founded WIS with the program's graduate assistant director, Jessie Wirkus Haynes; Kelsey Otero, then Director for Innovation at Marquette's 707 Hub; and Elizabeth Gibes, then Marquette's digital scholarship librarian. Despite uncertain times, we persisted, inviting plenary presentations about the persistence of writers and writing, and now I helm the cross-institutional steering committee that formed on the heels of the first symposium in 2018.

Typically, the WIS takes place in the third week of Marquette's spring semester. Our second year, we withstood a polar vortex; the following year, 2020, the WIS was the last in-person conference that many of us attended until we resumed in 2022, masks and vaxes required. In 2023, our sophomore year as a hybrid event and our fifth anniversary, we gathered under the umbrella of "Writing As ____." Previous themes include "Connect!," "Just Writing," and "Write It Out," all phrases that signal our commitment to exploring the deeply human activity of writing as not only praxes and products but also lived experiences, relations, and related ethical considerations. Although we initially imagined the WIS as a local, "drivable" event, we circulated the CFP widely, and our first proposal was from colleagues in New Jersey. Each year, we have registered approximately 100 people from across ranks and roles within and beyond higher education. To date, although many participants come from Wisconsin, WIS has involved writers and writing educators from 22 states and provinces.

In writing studies, small conferences have big presence, including regional affiliate events supported by national professional organizations and events coordinated by one or more host campuses, programs, and endowments. The WIS is a cross-institutional enterprise based (so far) at a single university (Marquette), funded mainly through registration (\$25-\$100 for onsite; \$15-\$60 for online). Regular support (e.g., space, stewardship) comes from Marquette's Social Innovation Initiative, Libraries, and Haggerty Museum of Art, while funding for plenary speakers and special features has come from Marquette's Center for Teaching and Learning and Office of Community Engagement, plus Mount Mary University. Additionally, Bedford/St. Martin's has made possible a fellows program, which offers selected participants (including contributors Holly Burgess and Abigayle Farrier) funding, mentorship, and an opportunity to contribute to the *Bedford Bits* blog.

Over five years, WIS has done more than foster professional community among colleagues with shared interest in writing. WIS has also become a community, which the quilted conversation below represents. Each section is culled from recorded conversations organized around prompts that asked contributors to reflect on what drew them to WIS, their experience(s), and their takeaways. Certainly, there is magic in what we do together; the WIS is also the result of an always-evolving collaborative design, which is well-reflected in this twenty-nine-person retrospective. However, readers most interested in the “how to” are welcome to skip right to the recipe at the end.

On behalf of all WISe ones, symposers past and future, I invite you to join us.

Such a Cool Little Thing

**Darci Thoune, Jennifer Kontny, Patrick Thomas, and Sara Heaser are long-time members of the WIS Steering Committee. As core organizers, they have also led efforts to develop symposium themes, establish the Bedford/St. Martin's Fellows (Darci), and select and mentor plenary presenters (Jennifer and Patrick).*

Darci: I remember Sara was sitting in my office, and we saw the first CFP. Just the word innovation got us. It was like, yeah, we need to be talking about innovation.

Sara: I was also drawn to the word innovation, and I thought that first CFP talked about writing in a really authentic way, as a tool that all people use. I distinctly remember the call for librarians, scientists, teachers, writers, community workers, people from all areas of the community to come together and talk about writing. And I think that's what got me excited.

Darci: I remember that first CFP, that invitation to collaborate, to play, to reimagine, and we continue to do that every year. It could be so easy to sort of slip into, “Well, this worked last year. Let's just do it this way next year.” But we resist that, and it's by design. And so WIS continues to be invitational or seeks to invite and innovate in new ways every year.

Sara: We're also not tied to one idea of what WIS has to be. I actually think that we are most tied to honoring what writing is, who it serves, and in what capacity. This year we opened up with two hours of writing time. To me that was radical, because writing itself often gets pushed off, right? It's often the last thing we give ourselves time to do, but it's actually the most important thing. And to devote time like that, to sit in a room of writers writing together, I think that really speaks to the spirit of what WIS is.

Patrick: I have come to think of each WIS as really a respite and a place of shared reflection about what we're doing and why it might be important. It's not only having the kind of social and intellectual space to share ideas but also being able to have the

aspects of the gathering that are less formal, less scheduled: taking time with presenters or with other participants, having immediate reflection and response.

Sara: As steering committee members, we very purposefully think about what kind of experience people are going to have. It's not about content, in a way. And I like how you said, Patrick, that you see this as a respite. I love that you use that word because I think that's our intention. We want people to come and really have the shared reflective experience of thinking about writing.

Darci: The WIS is always social by design. Like you spend the whole day there in the basement of Raynor Libraries, and we just kind of hunker down together. Those are really precious moments.

Jennifer: I think of WIS as an invitation to give sustained energy and intellectual attention—but also social attention—to people who are positioned in really different ways across institutions in their relationship to writing in general and in their trajectory as writers and people who are invested in writing as a profession or professionally, I should say.

Darci: Another one of the things I really like about the way we design WIS is that it's incredibly affordable. We make it so that people who may not get much funding can come. And there's a certain lack of pretension that goes with the invitational nature of the CFP every year—although I certainly do get star struck. I mean, like, we always have luminaries that come every year, and it feels very good to be able to talk to these people that you admire in this low pressure, lowkey, we're-having-a-glass-of-wine-looking-at-a-poster-session kind of way.

Patrick: I think part of what makes it not just invitational but also an invitation that people accept is it's a different kind of academic gathering that emphasizes people's strengths over sharing work for more critical review. The latter certainly happens, but it doesn't happen through the same mechanisms of critique as other conferences. It happens through a more open, non-hierarchical, and looser set of interests than what can often feel like gatekeeping or insider/outsider kinds of dynamics, where it's like, you know, God forbid, if you don't know the secret handshake. That's just not part of our agenda. It's more, to Jennifer's earlier point, like we take writing seriously but across the real, full range of what writing can be.

Jennifer: I feel like most conference presentations, whether they be roundtables or panels, are like mini-exhibitions of sorts, where the message is pre-crafted, and you're supposed to take something away. But I feel like what we're doing is more akin to creating rooms that are like installations, and they're not locked into the timeframe of a panel or workshop, and their meaning evolves.

Darci: There's something about the WISEs that are rather magical, like things are going to happen every year, something is going to happen, and I'm going to be taking it away with me.

Jennifer: Such a cool little thing we've built together.

Q&A

**WIS attendees Abigail Farrier, Derek Handley, Gitte Frandsen, Holly Burgess, Kaia Simon, Louise Zamparutti, and Margaret Perrow reflect on their experiences.*

Question: What drew you initially to the Writing Innovation Symposium?

Kaia: So, it was my first year out of graduate school, and Jenn sent an email to several people in the region. I chose to attend because I was looking for community. I was hoping also to learn more about how to direct a writing program because I was doing that from the get-go and really looking to connect with folks who could help and mentor me.

Derek: I think I first heard of the WIS from my colleague Shavon Watson, but I started at UWM during the pandemic, and nothing was really going on. I really didn't start paying attention to WIS until I received the email invitation from Patrick Thomas about possibly being a speaker—and I, of course, jumped on the opportunity. I was really interested in Jessica Edwards' workshop that year, and I wanted to bring my class this past year because I had been so pleasantly surprised. It wasn't just a regional conference.

Gitte: So, the first time I attended was in 2020, when I was a first-year PhD student, and an advanced PhD student, Molly Ubbusen, invited me to join a panel. I was super excited. I was terrified. It was the first time I've ever attended a conference and given a talk. Then, this year I was excited to join again because I had been working with a fellow Graduate Teaching Assistant mom about what it means to be in grad school as a first-gen student and a mom of younger children. When we saw the call for "Writing As _____," it felt like a really perfect call for us.

Louise: I think I was drawn to WIS initially because I knew people who were part of the organizational team, including some of my colleagues at UW-La Crosse. And WIS 2022 was the first in-person conference for me since the pandemic, and I was very eager to see people in person. But mostly I wanted to share my work and receive feedback.

Holly: I received my master's degree from Marquette and am currently in the PhD program; however, I had never heard of the WIS. Two of my colleagues mentioned that they were presenting at the WIS this year. I attended the WIS as I thought the

poster session would be a great way to show my dissertation visually. Creating the poster allowed me to map out my dissertation and present my work.

Abigayle: The fall of 2021 was the first time I taught a composition course at the university level. I'm a literature PhD student, and all my literature friends had told me composition is just something you have to get through. But then I loved comp! I enjoyed it so much that a professor suggested I look into some comp conferences, and so I found WIS.

Margaret: I found out about it from a colleague who'd received an email. She sent it to me and said, "This sounds like it's right up your alley." I looked at it and thought, 'Oh, no, not one more thing to do.' But something just flipped a switch. I was like, 'I am so exhausted and overwhelmed. I need some fun. And, yes, this looks like the perfect place to share the work that I've been doing with my students.'

Question: What were the highlights of your WIS experience(s)?

Louise: In 2022 it was just great to be back at an in-person conference, and it was also my first conference as a faculty member (rather than a graduate student). By participating in WIS, I felt so much less alone. Then, in 2023 I loved the format of the flashtalk. It made me really condense my presentation, which was about assaultive speech in relation to monuments that I study and some really quite violent examples of graffiti on campus. I gave a flashtalk about that and got great feedback.

Gitte: The concurrent session that my colleague and I presented at this year was called "Bodies of Work." It featured other grad students who spoke about composing in the pool, writing as being, and writing assistance. The format of five-minute flashtalks really made everyone stay super focused, and we had a lot of time for talk at the end that was just so full of energy and synergy. Even the people who live-streamed felt like they were in the room.

Derek: I enjoyed the panels that I heard this year. They were mostly graduate students presenting on writing when you're not actually writing—one man was talking about when he is swimming laps when he's composing—and then a couple of graduate students shared their experiences of what it's like to be parents and in grad school and on the job market. Listening to all those things is helpful for me when mentoring and advising graduate students.

Holly: I had a lot of fun. Hearing what other people were working on was interesting. I liked the poster session I was a part of. I thought having it during the reception was a great idea because it was low stakes. People were moving around and mingling. I received great feedback on my dissertation, with attendees pointing out things I hadn't considered. It's great when people approach you and say, "Hey, did you notice this link in your work?" and "That resonated with me."

Margaret: The project that I proposed was a presentation, but what came back quickly from Jenn and Max was an invitation to do an interactive website instead. I thought that sounded like a really cool challenge, and I'm happy to report that it turned out great. It was really fun to make; it was really fun to share; and the venue, which was the reception, was fantastic. I liked the conversations that happened when people came to the table and watched the student videos. Also, being able to give my students feedback from WIS attendees was really powerful. That presentation format is something that I would like to emulate at Southern Oregon University.

Abigayle: One of the things that stood out to me was the dinner the night before the symposium began. It was really wonderful to meet everyone. They were all so kind to take three grad students from Texas out to dinner and introduce themselves before everything really got kicked off. And then during the symposium, there was one panel just for grad students. It was great to be able to have that space to just talk with other graduate students, especially ones who were not from my own university.

Kaia: One of the things that stands out to me about the WISes I attended was the extent to which I felt like I was being hosted. I remember feeling truly like a guest, like I had been invited and that my presence mattered. Another thing about the overall experience was that it really was about writing. Each year there was a session where we were writing: we were creative writing, and we were writing collaboratively. I also think it's one of the only conferences I've been to where the conversations continue. Part of that is because you can get your arms around WIS, you know, like we're all kind of together. I really appreciate that.

Takeaways

**Aleisha Balestri, Jessie Wirkus Haynes, Kayla Urban Fettig, and Liz Angeli reflect on what they've gained from attending WIS as writers, writing educators, and members of different professional communities.*

Aleisha: So, 2023 was my first time participating in the Writing Innovation Symposium, and I've actually taken quite a lot away. One, and this is something that I didn't expect, is inspiration beyond the classroom. When we did the Community-Generated Poetry Project, it was something where I really wasn't sure what I was getting into, but the experience was impactful in so many ways. So, I actually talked to the facilitators, Barb and Melissa, and I'm trying to do something similar at COD to represent what students' experiences are.

And something else: My flashtalk was on how a narrative project I teach is a way to kind of vex the space, the tension that's created there. It was a precursor to research I'm doing now on why students are feeling so disengaged with writing and what is happening in their lives that makes this trend continuous. In fact, I just finished a related presentation, which I assumed was going to be mainly for instructors, but the audience ended up being almost all students. So, I asked them to join and share their

experience, and it was a very powerful conversation. Now, I want to investigate more, and I would love to see WIS bring students to the forefront and have them speak on this or other topics.

Kayla: The very first WIS I attended was right before the pandemic. As an adjunct, I got the chance to see graduate students talk on panels, and I got to have sidebar conversations about graduate school. WIS was the first conference where I learned how to network and ask questions (maybe too many) and was fully welcomed—and the price for the symposium for graduate students and adjuncts was beyond reasonable. It seemed like the best conference for me to dip my toes in.

Every year I take away something new, whether I can learn from others, network, and build relationships at this symposium or if it helps me reshape how I think I teach and research. It also made me understand what I am passionate about much better than what I thought previously. The evolution from first being an adjunct attendee to a PhD student presenter to one of the only graduate students on the Steering Committee has overwhelmingly made me feel welcomed. People know who I am, what I can do, and what I can advocate for in future WIS symposiums. At the same time, I get the luxury to work with some of the most influential scholars in the field in a capacity that doesn't seem hurried, disingenuous, or forced. It has been one of my favorite symposiums to attach myself to solely due to how positive it leaves me feeling every year.

Liz: What keeps me coming back to WIS is that I feel like it's a playground, and I don't feel like any other conference feels like a playground. I also think this is the only conference where I actually write things up and submit them for publication, maybe because I don't feel like other conferences are places where I can actually think through ideas. The symposium is a space where I feel like I can do that.

So last year for WIS, three of my graduate students and I ran a workshop about discernment mapping, which is an activity I created for a public humanities and career formation graduate class, and we now have an article forthcoming in *Jesuit Higher Education*. My WIS presentations and workshops have been impacting the work I do with communities outside academia. I completed spiritual direction training a couple years ago, and my cohort had our first reunion this past weekend. I was invited to talk about how I'm integrating my spiritual direction training into my academic work, and the symposium showed up twice! This is my favorite thing: One of my teachers from my training program, she's in her late 70s, has been a spiritual director for decades, and is a Dominican nun. She emailed me to see if she could use the discernment map prompt in a workshop she's leading, and I've been invited to do the discernment map for churches, which is really exciting.

Jessie: I love that it's generative, right? Early on, WIS made me understand the collaborative nature of writing and underscored that everyone is a writer. Each of the WISEs inspired me to think of writing as social justice or writing as inherently linked to change. Take Danielle Clapham's presentation at WIS 2018, "Space for Every Body: Reading for Access and Inclusion in the First-Year Writing Classroom." I have my stu-

dents do her spatial analysis every year in my empathy classes for healthcare students. I know we say that teachers steal things, but WIS is a place where we share things.

WIS is also inextricably linked to my ideas about curriculum. When WIS started, Jackielee Derks and I were making a scholarly article database for first-year writing, and that turned into something we presented at the symposium—a tool to help teach writing to students in any discipline. This project represents a core of my pedagogy, of the way I work, trying to make writing this accessible thing for everyone: we're talking about mathematicians as writers, and we're talking about healthcare workers and cinematographers—everyone is a writer. So, for me, I don't feel like the first-year writing curriculum ever died. I feel like it lives forward. And it just gets better and better.

Impact

**Over the years, WIS plenaries have included a presentation by Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter (2018), a roundtable facilitated by Maria Novotny (2019), and workshops led by Jessica Edwards (2022) and Barb Clauer and Melissa Kaplan (2023).*

Julie: In 2018, Bump Halbritter and I presented “Pedagogical Triage and Troubled Times,” which reminds me that the times have been troubled for a very long time. I remember thinking, then, about our curriculum in First-Year Writing at Michigan State and our set of pedagogical moves as a way to address conflict and polarity. I'm realizing now just how responsive that whole occasion felt, just sort of intimate and responsive. I don't think I've seen another conference space that worked like that.

Barb: I hope this doesn't sound how it might sound, but the invitation was such a surprise—and it was such an honor, in the sense that it's such a good thing to have an external voice that we trust say, ‘I can see how this might work at WIS, I can see some ideas.’ So, it was such a wonderful experience to need to rise to the occasion, which Melissa and I didn't imagine was in our future.

Jessica: I was definitely surprised and excited to receive an invitation from Patrick. It was my first time giving a plenary workshop, so it was a nice exercise intellectually. I definitely took some risks giving the talk as well. I brought music into the conversation and time to write during the session, and there were some other community moments that I ended up peppering through. So, it was definitely not a traditional talk. It was certainly one that required the audience to play, to have lots of interaction with me, which I felt was useful and fit into the symposium at large.

Melissa: Though Barb and I've collaborated since 2017, our very first conference workshop was at the 2022 WIS, followed by Imagining America's 2022 National Gathering, with the WIS 2023 invite in between. That invite was so exciting, and it was cool and challenging to shape, with Jenn's guidance, the plenary for everyone to experience the power of community-generated poetry.

Maria: A theme that I consistently see in the plenaries is how they're all discussing writing from an innovation lens, like innovation is always a part of it. Whether they're talking about that explicitly or not, they're thinking through writing and through invention in some capacity, as well.

Julie: I think that's true, but *innovative* innovation in a way that seems more low stakes, in such a way that you can actually take it in and learn from it, which is a really lovely and refreshing thing to be able to do with a new idea. At the closing "unconference" of the symposium in 2018, we wrote ideas on post-it notes, and then we went around and took inventory. What it said on the post-it note that I put up was that I understand learning to be a kind of loss, because I had been reading Deborah Britzman's work, and I was really excited about that idea. I also thought that that was fairly non-controversial, but it turned out to be controversial! There were good discussions around it, and they just reminded me what it means to have a commonplace in a way that was productive for me in thinking about the 2020 4Cs CFP. I remember that as a formative moment.

Jessica: I was excited by how interactive the sessions were. For the 2022 symposium, one memorable session for me happened to be Barb and Melissa's workshop. I remember very, very vividly actually creating a poem, and then we came together and read it aloud. And I think the idea of creating it together but then also making it come alive together was something that I thought was, really, a super great exercise. It definitely informed my own approaches to community work in my classes, where I'm like, okay, how can we create together and then work to make sure that we model or show what has been created in some way each time?

Barb: That first Poetry Project workshop we did was small but mighty. The poem that you all created you titled "The Beast," and it was with raw material connected to suicide and depression awareness. That was one of one of those large, multidisciplinary projects that the Poetry Project got to be a part of, that Melissa produced. So, all those layers, the layers of interconnectedness that WIS supports is really powerful. Our work for the 2023 plenary workshop was purposefully done anticipating what Dr. Melissa Tayles was going to do in her plenary talk on trauma-informed pedagogy. Being able to weave all that together and have the plenary workshop be a creative expression and exploration of the big concepts that Melissa would explore the day before: I just appreciated that setup and those layers so much.

Melissa: Another way we've layered at Lansing Community College involves theater students reading the poems. For the WIS-created poems, The Comet Project was enlisted, an undergraduate experimental theater troupe at Marquette. They took the workshop poems and in a couple hours, they created something I'd never envisioned: little plays that expanded the power of each poem —and then they performed them for the closing session! It was so moving and wonderful.

Maria: I must also say from a local perspective, and it's not just myself but other colleagues I know at UWM, we are so grateful for WIS. It's just inspiring to have a resource that you can tap into rather accessibly. And you can build a coalition around talking about writing, making arguments about why writing matters, and doing writing work that connects to the community that we're part of. It's just so important and valuable.

Ethos

**As members of the Steering Committee and Marquette colleagues, Jenna Green, Lilly Campbell, and Max Gray have a unique set of perspectives on the WIS and local benefits.*

Lilly: I really value the ethos of the symposium. I think it's one of the most focused on classroom practices that work and innovation in assignments and in pedagogy. I always leave with new ideas.

Jenna: I appreciate the accessibility of a local, campus conference, but I would say what keeps bringing me back is more than just the convenience. I always feel really rejuvenated, inspired.

Max: Jenna used the word invigorating, and WIS is invigorating or maybe inspiring to me. Also, I'll say as someone whose primary role is not in the classroom, being involved in the symposium has been really useful for me to listen in and continue to learn more about the ways that teachers think about their work and the work of their students, to help me understand what I can do from inside the libraries to support that work.

Lilly: I feel like it's been a place of consistency, when there's been a lot of upheaval. There was too much flux happening in our writing program, so WIS has offered some stability. I also think departmentally we have a lot of siloing between the people that teach our first-year writing course and our full-time faculty. We're doing lots of cool things with writing, and it's really important that we have spaces to share that. On a similar level, I'm thinking about our graduate students and the WIS being a really powerful space for them to see writing research as a kind of research, to think about their classrooms as potential sites for research, to make connections with the UWM program. WIS elevates their classroom work in ways that I think it doesn't get elevated enough.

Jenna: For me, it's also a chance to connect with people at Marquette in different ways. Max and I, we're working on another thing in ways that feel built upon from a kind of history and relationship and trust. And WIS doesn't seem to have a competitive or cutthroat environment at all. It's very welcoming, inclusive, and I think that

inspires people to really bring thoughtful ideas and research. Paul Feigenbaum was a plenary, and I remember him talking about the concept of failure. That's something that in my 3210 class I've really adopted. Chris Anson's project, cataloging teaching experiences in the pandemic with 100-word stories, I think that was really generative, too.

Lilly: I think some of the more powerful memories of WIS I have are ones that have created space for reflection on myself, on my teaching practices. I found the trauma-informed pedagogy talk by Melissa Tayles really powerful this year. And I think it was 2022 that Liz Angeli did a discernment activity, where we were doing mapping, that I still have hanging in my office.

Max: I also remember Liz Angeli and her graduate students' session. That was a good example of what is really important about so many folks' contribution to the symposium, which is to call collective attention to the very personal stakes of our writing for us. The pedagogy-oriented space of the symposium is also a very personal space for people. And I think that's really valuable for reminding us all why we do what we do on a daily basis, why we want to show up. Jessica Edwards's keynote from 2022, "Writing to Liberate: On Self, Community, and Meaningfulness," was another great example of really bringing to the forefront the work that our writing can do in our lives and also the lives of others.

Lilly: I was also thinking about our relationship with Bedford/St. Martin's. There's the really awesome dinner, which is always a highlight every year, but there's also the very real way that has put me in contact with publishers and broad conversations that I wouldn't have had before.

Jenna: I also think WIS is this great confidence-building symposium in that way. You're kind of like, 'Oh, okay! I tested reaching out to a publisher. Now I know I can do it again.' So, I think it helps me scaffold as a professional and researcher as well.

Max: I haven't spent the majority of my professional life in libraries. I was a graduate student in literary studies for a number of years, and I was teaching composition. So, dialoguing and sharing ideas with folks at the symposium helps me see more connections between the kind of work I'm doing now, and the different kinds of work I've done in the past. For example, there's a phenomenon that I see on a very regular basis on campus, where I'm trying to support people who are already interested in doing digital work and I'm trying to encourage people who maybe wouldn't have imagined themselves doing that work. At WIS, we've made those kinds of offers to people, and they've actually taken us up, which is a great testament to the very open and supportive space of the symposium. And that's really what we should be trying to support among our communities, you know, across the board: to experiment and do things differently than we would have imagined doing them or the way we've been doing them in the past.

On the Fringe

**In a conversation that spanned higher ed and healthcare, Bump Halbritter, Marie Cleary-Fishman, Kelsey Otero, Paul Feigenbaum, and Seán McCarthy surfaced some of the meanings that innovation has accrued within the WIS community.*

Seán: I met Jenn and Paul through the Coalition for Community Writing, and also a colleague of ours, Dawn Opel, and Dawn and I decided to go to WIS to work on an article about innovation. We thought what better place to do it than at an innovation summit of sorts? Paul was the plenary speaker at WIS that year, and Paul and I have been working closely together ever since. So, to me, innovation is relationship-based.

Kelsey: In so many circles I have worked in, there was this notion that innovation was more concentrated in business or engineering or disciplines outside of humanities. And I have always struggled with that, because when it comes to being a good innovator, your ability to communicate, to be creative, and to see connections are the skills I talk about with students, and they are all core things to the humanities, and writing in particular. But it's not always highlighted when you think of innovation. So, I think a lot about that, and how much WIS really shined a spotlight for me on how different groups can recognize and see where inclusive innovation fits.

Marie: Healthcare has a tendency to feel like, you know, our world is the worst, and our situation is the worst. We have the most problems; we're imposed on so much; and funding is bad. And so, you know, we can get kind of lost in our own world. And I find it really helpful—I think that's probably one of the best takeaways I had from the symposium—to hear the perspectives, good and bad, from other fields struggling in similar ways.

Bump: A lot of the work that Julie Lindquist and I have done has been innovative or has attempted to find purchase as innovation. At WIS, I do recall one conversation in particular where Julie and I were talking about something that really motivates an awful lot of our work. That's the concept of learning as loss, which goes back to Deborah Britzman. I remember how resistant people were: Like, I didn't get into this business to be a professor and start thinking about people losing shit. And that was not the first time we'd encountered that. But I mean in this particular instance it was really a memorable thing—at which point we turned our attention mostly towards commonplaces.

Seán: I think when we talk about innovation in a kind of an abstract way, we're thinking of building new things. But I'm now, more and more, seeing it through faith and relationships in the sense that I don't see how we get to do anything together if we don't have trust. And we don't have an openness to it working—or not working. And I think in some ways that WIS in both its structure and the way that it engendered conversation speaks to that kind of faith and openness and trust.

Paul: I'm interested in the way that conversation has evolved. I think increasingly I've come to see trust as the basic *sine qua non* of anything. I think it's the foundation of good teaching, the foundation of community. You can't do anything without trust; you can't really have a society without trust. And I think it's the breakdown of social trust in our general society that is the key contributor to the larger hyperpolarization and mutual hatreds that are going on everywhere.

Kelsey: I'm really big on how innovation doesn't mean brand new. I really like when we talk about innovation as something that creates value for whoever you're trying to solve a problem for. And so I'm always struck, after every symposium, how much value creation there is for the students that get to be the beneficiaries of lessons or conversations that were started at WIS and the ripple effect of how many other people are impacted, not just those who attended. I'm struck by the value creation that emerges from WIS because attendees have a space to build new connections and partnerships.

Marie: I think that if you break things down to a very, very fundamental level in whatever field you're looking at, that applies. If you don't have the right structure—which means people, equipment, resources, knowledge—if you don't have those things, and then you don't have the right processes in place, you can work forever to get an outcome, and you may never get it.

Bump: I think, Marie, there's also a segue between commonplace and structure plus process equals outcome. Because structure and process are commonplaces, right? I was looking over my presentation, and I think about 30 of the 300 slides that Julie and I presented in 30 minutes had the following phrase on it: we learn on the fringe of what we know. And I think that, again, speaks to commonplaces but also this idea that as we innovate, we're on the fringe of what we know. We don't make these sorts of massive leaps. We're always right at the edge of where we are, and those of us who are pointing towards innovation are potentially looking at a different fringe than others to grow. And so bringing those folks around is really tough. I think that's the real work of innovation.

Seán: I think the idea of fringe and periphery is important to what WIS is and the way that it operates. Because, you know, it's porous enough where Marie, who works in the healthcare sector, gets to be a central part of a conversation in a way that, like, if we brought Marie to Cs, that would never happen, right? So, it's the smaller spaces like Community Writing or WIS where I feel like those who are on the fringe of a discipline can find like-minded people. And I really appreciate the WIS for creating that space.

Conclusion: or, Three Easy Steps to Your Very Own WIS²

Jenn Fishman

Ending with a recipe is, to a degree, a feint. After all, small conferences are not easy weekday meals that take just thirty minutes, start to finish, and though WIS has some turnkey components, there is no pre-fab symposium kit. Really, the preceding conversations put it best, offering a dialogic sense of all that is involved in holding a meaningful recurring event. The narrative recipe that follows offers a compromise, a combination of stories, ingredients, and instructions plus one last invitation: to make your own WIS, to join us some time, or to participate in one of the many small conference communities already to be found.

1. *Start with an idea that fills a need and leadership, including core teams.* As Chief Capacitator, I assembled the first local host team. Subsequently, WIS participants formed a volunteer cross-institutional steering committee, and within it, a group of core organizers emerged. Each year, we regroup, and we (re)commit to filling the promises of the next symposium.
2. *Make time an ally by aligning processes with priorities.* We end each symposium by looking ahead and discussing what to keep, change, and add. In May, we meet (online) to brainstorm, guided by the priority we place on people, concrete practices, and creating possibilities. Plans cohere as steering committee members take up and agree to take on different aspects of emerging programing, and by August we have a production calendar and project leads.
3. *Embrace improv, which is not a free-for-all but a deeply rhetorical praxis.* There is always something. The year a polar vortex shut down Marquette's campus, we had 36 hours to revamp before participants arrived. Together, we marshalled all our available knowledge and resources, and the WIS went on. The same spirit drives our planning sessions, where we affirm new ideas with follow-up cues and questions (e.g., yes, say more, who, how, why) that lend themselves to deliberation and, over time, good group decision making.

So far, we have eschewed opportunities to scale up, expand out, and take on partners or sponsors that might significantly change our culture or focus. We have also decided that so far we don't need officers and elections or bylaws and dues to maintain vision, workflow, and integrity. Instead, WIS has an ethos that unites writers and writing educators who share a work ethic along with a sense of ethics that enables us to build and sustain community. In fact, we are currently developing plans for satellite events: think food trucks and cooking classes rather than franchises. Whatever transpires, we look forward to writing and innovating together.

Notes

1. As we explained in the WIS '23 CFP: "Flashtalks give writers and writing educators a chance to share their WISdom in short, snappy presentations meant to spark discussion. In five minutes—and no more— flashtalkers will discuss things they have done (rather than things they plan to do or things they think about). As part of their presentations, flashtalkers are invited to share a single artifact, such as a one-page double-sided handout, a piece of fruit, a half-page infographic, a bumper sticker, or a bookmark."

2. Hungry for more? Find transcripts of the conversations excerpted in this piece and related WIS documentation in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives.

Author Bios

Participants are listed alphabetically by first name, following the convention established in the first Writing Innovation Symposium program.

Abigayle Farrier is a graduate instructor at Texas Christian University, where she teaches composition and literature courses. Her research and teaching interests include nineteenth-century transatlantic women's writing, women's literary networks, Antiguan literary production, and the intersections of psychology, pedagogy, and writing.

Aleisha Balestri is an assistant English professor at the College of DuPage where she specializes in teaching first-year writing, emphasizing the interplay between research, digital media, and self-discovery. She also researches how the evolution of technology impacts equity and success within First-Year Composition and how it can be used to uplift student voices.

Barbara Clauer is a professor of English and writing at Lansing Community College. She is also the creator of the Community-Generated Poetry Project, exploring challenging concepts through collaboratively created art.

Bump Halbritter is Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University. Bump's research, teaching, scholarship, and national service have centered on equitable teaching, learning, and assessment practices, especially with regard to non-traditional literacies, storytelling, audio-visual writing, and informed reflective praxis.

Darci Thoun is First-Year Writing Program Coordinator and Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse where she teaches first-year writing and a range of upper-level writing courses in the writing and rhetoric major. Her teaching, research, scholarship, and public intellectual work span the fields of writing studies and fat studies.

Derek G. Handley is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His research interests/areas of specialization include African American Rhetoric and Literature, writing studies, rhetorical history, and the Black Freedom Movement.

Elizabeth Angeli, Associate Professor of English at Marquette University and a spiritual director, has worked with prehospital care clinicians and educators to improve healthcare writing training and practice. As a spiritual director, Liz accompanies people on their personal and professional journeys, teaches discernment-based writing classes and workshops, and serves on retreat leadership teams.

Gitte Frandsen, PhD candidate at UW-Milwaukee, researches translingual literacy studies, cultural rhetorics, and transformative praxes in teaching, writing program administration, and writing across the curriculum. Her dissertation focuses on the linguistic superdiversity of transnational students in U.S. writing classrooms.

Holly Burgess is a PhD candidate and instructor at Marquette University. Her research and writing center on African American literature, violence and Black activism, hip-hop, and LGBTQ+ studies. Her dissertation is a literary genealogy of Black social movements and traces how Black activists write, react, and respond to extrajudicial killings.

Jenn Fishman, WIS co-founder and Chief Capacitator, is Associate Professor of English and Co-Director of the Ott Memorial Writing Center at Marquette University. Her teaching, research, scholarship, and national professional service span feminist rhetorics, writing research, undergraduate research in writing studies, and community listening.

Jenna Green is a teaching assistant professor and Assistant Director of Foundations Instruction at Marquette University. Her teaching and research focus on digital and multimodal composing, literacy studies, and multilingual writers.

Jennifer Kontny, WIS steering committee member, is Director of the Writing Program and Associate Professor of English at Mount Mary University. Jennifer's work stretches across multimodal composing, feminist epistemologies, writing programs, quantitative methodologies, and digital narrative.

Jessica R. Edwards, PhD, is Associate Professor of English, Co-Academic Director for the Mandela Washington Fellowship Program, and Writing Internship Coordinator at the University of Delaware. Her teaching, research, service, and scholarship investigate critically conscious pedagogies to encourage thoughtful public writing practices.

Jessie Wirkus Haynes is Assistant Professor of English at Bellin College, specializing in composition, narrative medicine, and DEI work for healthcare students. Her teach-

ing, research, scholarship, and community service focus on collaborative ways to empower students and foster social change through language and the act of writing.

Julie Lindquist is Professor of Rhetoric and Writing and Director of First-Year Writing at Michigan State University. Julie's academic work addresses class identities and working-class language and culture; theories of rhetoric and culture; literacy theories and practices; inclusive and equitable teaching practices; narrative methodologies, and pedagogies of storytelling.

Kaia L. Simon is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Blugold Seminar Writing Program at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. Her teaching, research, service, and administrative work span transnational literacy studies, feminist rhetorics, critical Hmong studies, and rhetoric and composition.

Kayla Urban Fettig, a Mount Mary University adjunct and University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin PhD student, attended the last three WISEs. Her communities include GTAs, adjuncts, and other contingent laborers; first-year writers and writing teachers, and the Milwaukee-based non-profit The Community.

Kelsey Otero is the Senior Director of Community Engagement at Marquette University. She works to build meaningful bi-directional partnerships, collaborate on new social impact initiatives (such as the WIS), and strategically connect resources between the Milwaukee community and the Marquette campus.

Lilly Campbell is Associate Professor of English at Marquette University where she oversees the Foundations in Rhetoric course. Her teaching and research focus on feminist rhetorics, rhetorics of health and medicine, and technical and professional communication.

Louise Zamparutti is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Her research and teaching take a social justice approach to technical communication, challenging normative assumptions of objectivity and incorporating historically underrepresented authors and audiences into the development of student writing.

Margaret Perrow is Professor and Chair of English at Southern Oregon University. As director of the Oregon Writing Project at SOU, she works closely with teachers at all stages of their careers; her research interests include teachers' professional identities and ELA pedagogy.

Maria Novotny, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, collaborates with fertility providers and advocates on coalitional efforts with the Building Families Alliance of Wisconsin. Her research integrates storytelling and

other creative practices as tools for reproductive healthcare advocacy. Her collection *Infertilities, A Curation* will feature such work.

Marie Cleary-Fishman is a nurse and Vice President, Clinical Quality for the American Hospital Association (AHA). Her strategic vision led to the formalization of the Funded Partnership work unit which writes for, obtains, and executes grants and contracts to support the AHA and member strategic priorities, including utilization of Quality Improvement concepts and methods.

Maxwell Gray is a digital scholarship librarian in Raynor Memorial Libraries at Marquette University. He is a member of the Writing Innovation Symposium's steering committee, where he supports multimodal research displays.

Melissa Kaplan, multidisciplinary arts producer, is Academic and Arts Outreach Coordinator at Lansing Community College, Lansing, MI. She creates, facilitates and promotes programs and events that engage the arts with other disciplines, exploring a wide range of social issues.

Patrick W. Thomas is Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in English at the University of Dayton. His teaching and scholarship focus on digital composition, social media, and empirical research methods.

Paul Feigenbaum is Associate Professor of English at Florida International University and Co-Editor of the *Community Literacy Journal*. His scholarship, teaching, and community engagement currently focus on transdisciplinary problem-solving, generative failure, engaged listening, and prison literacy.

Sara Heaser is an associate teaching professor who studies, teaches, and writes about first-year writing. Her writing has been published in *Composition Studies*, *The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, and on *The Mind Hears*, a blog by and for deaf and hard-of-hearing academics. She is a steering committee member for the Writing Innovation Symposium.

Seán McCarthy is a professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication and Director of the Cohen Center for the Humanities at James Madison University. He pursues impact-focused transdisciplinary projects with local nonprofits and nonprofit funders, regional and national government departments, private companies, think tanks, and other universities.