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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Article

# Introduction: The CWCA/ACCR Conference on Transformative Inclusivity

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## **Vidya Natarajan**

The CWCA/ACCR annual conference with the theme of Transformative Inclusivity was to have been held in London, Ontario, in May 2020. By April 2020, it became clear that gathering in person was not viable, and the conference was postponed to 2021. Across the world, 2020-2022 were the years of the pandemic, which made us acutely aware of bodily vulnerability as well as of ableism at the individual, governmental, and institutional levels. Across the world, but especially in the North American context, these were also the years that saw a revival of antiracist energy, in the wake of the grassroots protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd by American police, and by multiple similar incidents of white supremacist violence. In Canada, the discovery of unmarked graves in the homeland of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation corroborated the narratives of residential school survivors and forced many settlers to finally acknowledge the realities and ongoing impacts of the genocide perpetrated on Indigenous Peoples in this country. In London, Ontario, where the editors of this special section live, in June 2021, four members of the Afzaal family were murdered for being racialized and Muslim by an angry white man.

Writing centres could not remain secluded from the moral shock or the pedagogical and practical implications of these developments. As the pandemic unfolded, our worlds shrank to some degree, but at the same time we seemed to end up paying greater attention to social inequity all around us. We put on our masks and joined large public gatherings that mourned the people lost to these terrible events, and we grew more deeply conscious of the injustices that our “normal” lives normalized. The energy of protest flowed into many of the things we did during these years. In post-secondary

institutions, the *race*-word popped out into the open, and the relief, for some of us, was palpable. Ableism could not be concealed as deniers refused vaccines and ripped off their masks in the name of freedom, with no thought for the immunocompromised. Many writing centres in Canada have been taking the idea of inclusivity to heart for a while now, but during these two years, the work of reimagining these spaces to further social and linguistic justice accelerated noticeably. Challenging and dismantling white settler hegemony, homophobia, transphobia, and entrenched institutional ableism felt like the actions of the moment. Examining and embracing radical inclusivity in writing centre pedagogy and practice made more sense than ever before.

Thus, while presenters at the CWCA/ACCR conference shared research on practical writing centre issues and pedagogical and technical innovations, questions of power and politics occupied the foreground of the 2021 iteration. Liz Akiwenzie's uncompromising welcome address centering Indigenous values flowed into Neisha-Anne Green's opening plenary talk titled "Transformative Justice": both speakers delivered stirring and powerful calls to action, challenging the audience to disrupt and reimagine the daily business of writing centres in radical ways. Jeff Preston's immensely thought-provoking workshop titled "Rehabilitating the Academy: Confronting Ableism in Pedagogy and Practice" outlined ways of understanding disability justice in writing centre practice. These ideas resonated with the rich re-examination of the meanings and manifestations of "access" in M. Remi Yergeau's closing plenary address entitled "Sensing Access."

One of the highlights of the conference was a dedicated session in which racialized participants met and shared experiences. More than a "special interest group" session, this confab led to the creation of the first caucus within CWCA/ACCR: the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) caucus. Another key session tracked the crafting, by a collective of Canadian writing centre scholars, of an antiracism statement intended for posting on CWCA/ACCR's website. The statement was circulated for feedback during the conference, was the focus of lively, honest, and transformative discussion during the general body meeting, and was eventually posted with substantial revisions that reflected the perspectives of members of the BIPOC writing centre community.

As we have returned to "normal," many of us have also quickly realized the limits of our temporary agency to create change. Backlash has come quickly enough, and many of the flexible or equitable innovations that emerged during the pandemic have already been walked back. Exhaustion and burnout have been the result. One direct consequence of this is that a number of articles that were submitted to this special section were not revised and resubmitted after the peer review process. We

wish we could have included those brilliant pieces, but to their authors we want to say: *we understand*.

## **Lisa Kovac**

I've always felt that writing centres could be ideal sites of transformative inclusivity. Tutors usually meet one student at a time, and respond to the distinct strengths and knowledge gaps that each writer brings to each session. However, each centre likely has too-standardized practices that could benefit from the individualization tutors routinely engage in during appointments and drop-in sessions.

For example, at the writing centres I tutored in pre-pandemic, all session logs were hand-written notes on hard-copy print forms. As a tutor with a print disability, I required individualized accommodation to log sessions electronically, then print my session notes to file with those of my sighted peers. The writing-centre practice of finding solutions to individual needs paved the way for the ease of this accommodation, but this solution still left me lacking access to my peers' session notes for recurring clients. Eagerly as my colleagues implemented my partial inclusion, the pre-existing system which we worked within ultimately framed me as an exception to a rule, an aberration from the average tutor who is assumed to be non-disabled.

Equitable access came on the heels of the pandemic: suddenly, everyone's session notes were online. While the pandemic has imposed restrictions, among them exclusively online appointments and the consequent loss of working with students and colleagues face-to-face, the pandemic has also required writing centres to adapt in radical, systemic, transformative ways to continue serving students. We now recognize that wholesale systemic change is possible: it's possible to work remotely; it's possible to give students a choice between synchronous and asynchronous virtual appointments; it's possible to meet virtually with students at atypical hours, across time zones and national borders; it's possible to create a system of logging session notes that doesn't subtly designate tutors as normal or abnormal.

Each of these realized possibilities, and the transformations of writing-centre policy that turn them into practices, promotes the inclusion of more diverse students and tutors as a matter of course, rather than as an exception to an implicit expectation of non-existent normalcy. We know now that we can work with students who benefit more from synchronous online appointments than in-person ones, or from flexibility in timing, as well as with tutors working remotely or doing their paperwork virtually. I view these changes as a call for us to recognize how many other transformations toward inclusivity we have the capacity to make.

As pandemic restrictions loosen, and we have the capacity to regain the advantages of in-person tutoring, we also have an opportunity to acknowledge, retain, and expand our capacity for systemic change. While we once again renegotiate the details of meeting students on campus, how can we recognize—and transform our systemic practices in response to—the diversity of students' and tutors' abilities and needs?

*Discourse and Writing/Redactologie* has, for some years, offered a space for the publication of articles from the CWCA/ACCR conference and, more generally, articles by writing centre scholars. In this special section, Cassidy Rempel and Helen Lepp Friesen, in "Benefits and Challenges of Zoom Tutoring during the Covid-19 Pandemic," report on their empirical research project on online tutoring, which found that while tutors expressed comfort with, and a preference for, online tutoring, tutees by and large preferred face-to-face and in-person tutoring, despite the flexibility offered by online platforms. Elaine Khoo and Xiangying Huo, in "Toward Transformative Inclusivity through Learner-driven and Instructor-facilitated Writing Support: An Innovative Approach to Empower English Language Learners," document the effectiveness of the online avatar of a long-running, individually tailored, inclusively designed program of writing instruction for English Language Learners. Ilka Luyt, in "Location Matters: Using Online Writing Tutorials to Enhance Knowledge Production," discusses the benefits of online tutorials that employ writing centre techniques to create lively opportunities for discussion between tutor and multiple tutees in an embedded writing instruction project.

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