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More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values

2017-09-12 08:27:03

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In the fall of 2016, my colleagues Tess Lanzarotta, Marco Ramos, and I met as the core organizers for the “Critical Histories, Activist Futures” conference to hammer out our individual roles. We decided that I would take on the role of head of local arrangements, managing all of the practical logistics for the conference: food, room reservations, registration, etc. “Local arrangements” is, at first glance, a series of crucial but unsexy grunt work tasks. Perhaps, at this very moment, images from your own past of stacking folding chairs and wrestling with projector cords are beginning to swirl in your head at the mention of this phrase. Before you roll your eyes and click away, let me try to convince you that local arrangements can be a productive space to think about what an academic conference looks like and who it is for, as well as to grapple with the limits of the conference as a model for academic discourse.

I embraced the role initially because I *do* feel strongly that in order for an event to achieve its objectives, the mundane aspects must be taken care of and must run as seamlessly as possible. Prior experience organizing events has taught me that no matter how interesting and well-presented a symposium or lecture’s content is, if there is not enough food served afterwards or the room is very cold that’s all anyone will talk about. This is to say nothing of my own personal experience as a graduate student, scooping up free sandwiches at events and watching my professors race each other to the coffee dispenser during break times.

But over the seven months spent working on local arrangements for the conference, I also came to feel that it could be an avenue to express one of the primary concerns of “Critical Histories, Activist Futures”: to think broadly about what activism as scholarship might look like. How could even the seemingly minute details of conference planning speak to the values we, as conference organizers, were trying to express? We took inspiration from our colleagues on Yale’s campus. When we started to plan the conference in the summer of 2016 we were energized by the bold actions of NextYale and other activist organizations (especially those spearheaded by undergraduates) that could be seen and felt all over campus. As with activists on other university campuses across the United States, these Yale students were constantly derided by cable news

pundits, newspaper journalists, and university administrators, and often some of their classmates too, as “snowflakes.” Supposedly, these students’ refusal to be subjected to a hostile learning environment, and their articulations of why Yale made them feel unsafe or unwelcome, was simply a lack of “grit” or an overabundance of sensitivity. We reacted to the “snowflake rhetoric” by making a conscious decision to foreground accessibility and inclusivity in organizing “Critical Histories.” This forced us to ask ourselves, on a practical level, how could our logistics help carve out the more inclusive environment we wanted for our event, even within the often hostile space of the university?

Some of the answers to these questions materialized in the following ways: Our registration form queried participants on their dietary restrictions and allergies and we shaped our catering plan to accommodate their answers. We reserved a nearby fridge for any attendees who needed to bring their own food. Student organizers checked the event space for the conference to make sure it was wheelchair accessible, and our registration form also queried participants on individual accessibility needs (one individual with low vision told us that we were the first conference organizers to offer them printed materials in a large font). We chose a room for the panels with a gender-neutral bathroom attached, and with a private room nearby that could be used easily by lactating mothers. We included a tribal acknowledgement in our opening remarks. We asked speakers in advance to inform us of their preferred pronouns. A few days before the conference we made nametags for all of the registered attendees and included a blue sticker on the nametags of Yale HSHM graduate students. We then informed all of the conference attendees that they could ask anyone with a blue sticker if they needed directions around campus or New Haven, or help with any similar issue. This list of practical steps is not intended as a way for my colleagues and me to pat ourselves on the back for organizing such an inclusive and accessible conference. Indeed, as some of the future pieces in this series will discuss, “best practices” and other frameworks meant to uphold concepts like diversity, inclusivity, and ethics often reify power imbalances or only serve to absolve those in power of any lingering guilt. Instead, this list is meant to point out that many of these steps are not regularly integrated into academic conference planning, when they easily could be, and when they go a long way towards setting the tone of an event and broadening the scope of who may feel comfortable attending.

However, we did recognize that ultimately, one of the biggest logistical hurdles to making our event as inclusive as possible was its location at Yale University. My fellow organizers and I set out with the goal of creating a dialogue around race, science, medicine and social justice that would include participants from outside of academia. However, we found that given the often fraught, if not downright hostile, histories of universities in

their surrounding communities (especially in Yale's case), the very act of holding an event within university walls dissuaded many potential attendees from coming. Similarly, as students secluded within those university walls, we found ourselves ill equipped to reach out beyond them. Yale University has numerous officially sanctioned "community partnerships" and other initiatives that run through approved university channels at top levels of administration. But it doesn't provide similar support to students who want to create ongoing relationships with non-Yale sanctioned community organizations and institutions in New Haven.

This realization of being ill equipped of course does not absolve us of our responsibility to forge these relationships on our own. We realized, for example, that while we circulated our call for papers outside of Yale through familiar and comfortable academic channels, we did not do enough legwork to distribute it through non-Yale channels around New Haven. Nor did we create a document legible to anyone not already steeped in the language of the discipline of history of science and medicine. What the realization of being ill-equipped *did* do, however, was to remind us that while the institution within which we operate gives us the privilege to host a conference (and pats us on the back for doing so) it also serves as barrier between us and the people we have claimed as part of our conversation.

We also recognized that even within the elite sphere of academia, not every university has the rich resources that we were able to muster to make "Critical Histories, Activist Futures" possible. Our History of Science and Medicine program has several knowledgeable and generous administrative professionals who helped us navigate room reservations and locate caterers. Our supportive faculty partners helped us access substantial sources of funding from across the university. Yale has a well-staffed Office on Disabilities that advised us on how to make our event as accessible as possible. Not every group of graduate students will be able to draw on such extensive resources when they want to organize a conference. While our funding did not stretch far enough to offer travel reimbursements to our participants (a feature that would have made our event more widely accessible), we were able to offer attendees free lodging with Yale graduate students, which, again, may not be possible in every academic community. We also did not think to have our conference materials translated into languages other than English, though we were reminded during the conference that the assumption that all academic events will be conducted in English excludes potential participants, and with them differing viewpoints and experiences.

During our conference lunchtime roundtable, "Deploying Scholarship as Activism," our colleague Amanda Joyce Hall noted that activism should be

understood not as a discrete activity but a daily and continuous set of practices. Seen through this lens, local arrangements for a conference moves from being a list of boring grunt work to a potential site of scholarly activism, in that it has the potential to help carve out a more inclusive, more accessible, more comfortable space even within an environment that has often been unwelcoming and aggressive to many. At the same time, it is important to realize that thoughtful local arrangements alone can go only so far towards this goal. Throughout the conference we heard from student attendees – medical students especially – who felt that the “diversity training sessions” they attended at the beginning of each academic year were an example of university administrators only ticking a box; attempting to solve a pervasive structural problem by following a short list of concrete steps rather than attentively studying and addressing underlying issues. Similarly, hosting a truly inclusive and welcoming conference will require radically re-thinking why and where conferences are held, and whom they are intended to benefit. The simple process of retrospectively reviewing our local arrangements planning and its shortcomings makes the need for this re-thinking wildly obvious.

Coda: My fellow organizers and I discussed the potential for “Critical Histories, Activist Futures” to become a model for graduate student-organized conferences on the theme of justice in history of science and medicine, a model that could be replicated at different universities year after year (in the spirit of the Joint Atlantic Seminars for the History of Medicine and for the History of Biology). With this vision in mind my colleague Chelsea Blink compiled and edited a practical guide for anyone who would like to organize a similar conference, based on reflections from students who helped to organize “Critical Histories, Activist Futures.” If you would be interested in accessing this document, please reach out to me [via e-mail](#).

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“[Critical Histories, Activist Futures](#)” is a series edited by Tess Lantarotta and Sarah M. Pickman.

AMA citation

Raikhel E. More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13728>. Accessed September 11, 2017.

APA citation

Raikhel, Eugene. (2017). *More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values*. Retrieved September 11, 2017, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13728>

Chicago citation

Raikhel, Eugene. 2017. *More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13728> (accessed September 11, 2017).

Harvard citation

Raikhel, E 2017, *More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values*, Somatosphere. Retrieved September 11, 2017, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13728>>

MLA citation

Raikhel, Eugene. "More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values." 12 Sep. 2017. Somatosphere. Accessed 11 Sep. 2017.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13728>>