Employing Poetry to Understand the Transformative Experience of Attending a Virtual Conference

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Abstract
In this article the author employs the poetic form to crystallize the transformative event of attending a virtual conference for the first time. The poem revealed a range of themes, among others: embodied and disembodied experiences; interplay and tension between poles such as north–south, local–global, virtual–real, and poetic–technological; the leveling of power dynamics and gender differences; deconstruction of conventions and norms for such etiquette of face-to-face events; experiencing multiple identities, playing many roles simultaneously, satisfying curiosity and desire by having it all, and the compromises involved. A meta-theme running through many of the above is liminality—finding oneself on thresholds (Harrison, 2009), followed by border crossing and conceptual transformation (Meyer & Land, 2005).

The poem illuminates ways of knowing and being academic in the 21st century, risk taking and rehearsing new modes of learning and researching, and the discomfort and liberation of this experience.

Keywords
virtual conference, poetry, risk taking, multiple identities, thresholds

Virtual Conference on Learning Futures

Thirty degrees south in steaming heat
I stumble towards laptop, creased from sleep,
first virtual conference begging:

construct from walk-in closet on the screen
(while dunking rusks in rooibos tea)
a sassy chic in a boyish suit—
the me that delegates should rather meet.

Settled in, keyboards clicking, hello chirps sift
like small soft feathers onto my screen:
fellow delegates wrapped in scarves
sipping Ceylon and Darjeeling
report they are all snowed in.

Proceedings begin, keynote speaker greets in video,
speaks of learning through play, to do things in a different way.
Ways of the future? Audience spell-bound,
all bodes well for orderly beginnings.

Then, while the presenter is still speaking
like the first plump raindrop
on a thirsty plane
someone posts a comment for everyone to see
. . . and everyone jumps in—a cloudburst of text
pours across the savannah of my flat screen:
cryptic thoughts, critique, opinions.
I wait for the chair to call for order, instead

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she picks up on some points, passes it on,
the speaker fields questions in between.

Squeezed against my comfort zone’s seams,
I lurk and learn . . .

then leap in,
abandoning manners meant for
face to face ways of being—

download read text furiously field emails
welcome an unexpected guest at the door dash to
the corner store do a few chores soothe a child on
my lap, blog a few lines keep my boss happy feed a
family (and the cats) upload pics to a photostream,
tweet in between—lost in layers of learning,
new ways of being.

Eight days later at close of proceedings
time is announced for conference dinner.
Bandwidth kaput, multitasked out,
I sip solo sundowners South, swat mosquitoes
in the breeze of mangoes and sea.

North, delegates settle snug under eiderdown . . .
while somewhere in the cyber sky
their avatars in Second Life stilettos
dance and play the night away.

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Glossary

rooibos — Afrikaans for “red bush”—South African herbal tea
sundowners — South African term for drinks at sundown

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conceptual framework for teaching and learning. Higher Edu-
cation, 49, 373-388.

Bio

Marí Peté works in e-Learning development at the Durban
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