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# LOEX 2022: A focus on design justice and community care

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As a first-time LOEX attendee in a relatively new instruction librarian role, I was optimistic about the conference experience. I expected it would help reinforce concepts still fresh from my LIS curriculum. I also hoped it would generate new ideas, and model progressive instructional practices and critical pedagogy foregrounding inclusion, equity, accessibility, and justice as professional imperatives. Not a short list!

I have previous mentors (and library Twitter!) to thank for setting high expectations for LOEX, making it the first on my early career professional development wish list. The presence of several particularly amazing breakout sessions combined with a phenomenal plenary by Mike Caulfield and wonderful collegial interactions meant that LOEX 2022 was an experience that I haven't stopped ruminating over since.

Still, I would be remiss to submit a conference report concerning topics of inclusion and equity in a pandemic year for an in-person only conference without first acknowledging the accessibility considerations involved in attending such an event. One of the breakout sessions I found deeply resonant was *Who's got the power?: Claiming and distributing power through design justice*, led by the Ohio Five Libraries Information Literacy Cohort. A powerful reflection exercise asked participants to "think about a time when design failed you or someone [close to you]...if you are not from a historically excluded group, imagine how that experience might have impacted you *even more* if you were".

There is a plethora of design considerations involved in planning a conference (more, I'm sure, than I realise), and in one's decision to attend an in-person conference during a pandemic. The Design Justice Framework & Principles include, amongst others:

- centering the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process
- prioritising the design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer
- working toward non-exploitative solutions
- believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience

Decisions made in planning and attending an in-person conference during a pandemic are invariably complex and difficult, but it's also crucial to acknowledge that such a calculus isn't identity- or power-neutral. Chronically ill and disabled people are negatively impacted in a disproportionate way. So are folks who experience marginalisation in the form of poorer health outcomes due to structural racism, bias (on the basis of gender for example), stigma (such as that faced by the LGBTQIA+ community), and other factors that result in similar systemic disparities.

At the same time, it's fairly well established that opting out of scholarly and professional activities can be detrimental to one's livelihood, particularly for those of us in more precarious positions (such as graduate students, early career librarians, adjunct instructors, and minoritised faculty on the tenure clock, among others). Conferences specifically often provide lower-stakes, entry-level and friendly professional development opportunities that can be difficult to find elsewhere. This combination of disproportionate risk with precarious opportunity can create an

intractable tension between prioritizing one's physical health and well-being and potentially being penalised for failing to meet a nebulously defined, largely implicit set of neoliberal standards in professional (especially academic) librarianship.

This year anxiety and conflict surrounding conferences and travel (library-related and otherwise, with LOEX as no exception) have inundated my Twitter feed, group chats and work conversations. As usual, I could find no better commentary on our current state of affairs than Fobazi Ettarh (2022) in her blog post *Conferences - The 5 Stages of Grief*, linked from the Tweet displayed in figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Tweet by Fobazi Ettarh



*Note.* Tweet reproduced with permission of Fobazi Ettarh, licensed under [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

That said, I appreciated that LOEX (2022) instituted a wide range of COVID-19 safety policies, above and beyond that of many other conferences, and exceeding the precautions that were in effect in my home state and university. Recommendations for making instruction and programming more accessible were also on the table at *Bringing disability into the conversation: Creating anti-ableist community at your institution*, presented by Elizabeth Novosel and Paige Cowl. The material covered a lot of ground, in addition to the aforementioned recommendations: disability foundations (definitions, varying models for disability); common barriers that disabled students often face; and an exploration of what a democratic and anti-ableist community of practice might look like to support this type of disability justice work in libraries. I left this session buzzing with excitement about the possibilities that a community of practice might have for this domain.

Community was a strong commonality in nearly all of the critically-oriented sessions I attended. *Who's got the power?* emphasized that design justice work isn't meant to be done alone, but rather through "finding your people". It is an inherently collaborative, community-based framework that de-centres the individual and emphasises shared knowledge and tools. A lightning talk by Julia Maxwell discussed a library peer mentor program that leverages the existing social and community capital of student workers and, combined with in-depth research and instructional training, provides robust and approachable peer-to-peer support.

Perhaps one of the strongest community-oriented approaches I found was in Alexandra Howard's session, *Combating "the other" pandemic: Building campus and community alliances towards an anti-racist information literacy*. Despite not having a business or entrepreneurial background myself, I was able to find relevance and applicability in nearly the entire session on anti-racist community engagement, beyond the community and domain in which it was being explored. The presenter modelled critical reflective practices by clearly and responsibly situating themselves and their institution in relation to the people and communities they engaged with. The moral and ethical implications of community engagement work were thoroughly explored, as were semantics (community engagement as reciprocal partnership rather than charity or even community service) and accountability measures.

Strategies for responsible community engagement that were shared included:

- challenging expertise – recognize the richness and validity of lived experience in local communities
- not just accepting, but welcoming critique
- asking questions and really listening to the answers
- always following through on commitments

A second design justice thread that I found interwoven throughout the sessions I admired was the thorough integration of user perspectives and feedback throughout the design, implementation and assessment process. Two lightning talks detailed projects where user-centred studies significantly shaped outcomes. Tina Lin and Rebecca Greer presented their work on a pilot study evaluating the usability of instructional videos for first-generation and non-native English-speaking students, and Michelle Demeter discussed surveying a first-year and transfer student cohort for their impressions on academic integrity, including affect-oriented responses. In both cases, intentionally and proactively seeking out and analysing student feedback was instrumental to refining and iterating the instructional object or experience with specific student community groups in mind.

Considering this year's overarching conference theme was "Retooling library instruction for today's learning environments", I'm eager to see what lessons LOEX and other conferences take and incorporate into future events based on the library community's collective lived experiences over the past few years. The material is all around us - for example, one of the breakout sessions that I regrettably missed due to a conflict was Leah Morin's *Handle with care: Pandemic teaching habits we can and should continue in person*. The topics Morin covered - feminist theory, care ethics, affective engagement and trauma-informed pedagogy form a powerful touchstone for inclusive, equitable teaching. However, the presentation like others I've touched on, was ripe for harvesting lessons not just for teaching our students, but also for developing guidelines for ourselves when engaging in professional practice with one another. The unfamiliar environment of a conference, combined with brief, attention demanding, often participatory-intensive session formats, parallels the one-shot classroom in so many ways. It seems only natural that strategies to reduce anxiety, uncertainty and stress in order to "reach the state of attentive calm necessary for learning" (Zignarelli-Sweet, 2021 as cited in Morin, 2022) would be well suited to library conferences.

Establishing clear accessibility standards and providing support to volunteer conference planners and individual presenters so they can meet those expectations is a professional imperative for building a more inclusive conference experience. The following barriers to participation could all be rectified with more intentional design decisions:

- Breakout room spaces that are too deep for participants at the back to see the presentation
- Seating that faces the back of the room unless you physically move it
- Visual materials that don't conform to text size, font type, or colour contrast standards

We're all here to learn and grow together, but only if all of us are actually able to be fully, meaningfully present and supported. Let's all join in the call for accessibility and inclusion in all of our professional spaces; contribute to workable solutions toward attaining those standards (particularly for our smaller conferences which don't benefit from the financial heft and resources of organizations such as ALA); and when necessary, apply fair but firm pressure for accountability when we sometimes fail to meet expectations. We all fall short from time to time; experiencing failures and course-correcting (an entire LOEX 2022 track!) is part and parcel of growth, but through strong community, care ethics, and yes, retooling, we can and should expect to see progress toward a better, more accessible library profession.

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