

## Director's Report on LOEX 2020: Online

Brad Sietz, LOEX

The first thing I noticed when I walked in was the smell. Typically, when you walk into a business-class conference hotel, you first notice visuals—a soaring atrium, a well-appointed lounge, a buzz of activity around the registration desk. But as I stepped a few feet into the lobby of the Ypsilanti Marriott at Eagle Crest on March 3, 2020—something (literally) didn't smell quite right.

I was at the hotel on a planning mission, buoyed by hope but shadowed by trepidation. As is typical, the LOEX conference (our 48th annual) had sold out in less than a day and that, combined with the fact we had over 50 people on the wait list, prompted myself and my conference co-chairs (Amanda Nichols Hess of Oakland University and Molly Ledermann of Washtenaw Community College) to confirm we understood the maximum capacity for our rented space. It had been surprisingly difficult to find a suitable location in Michigan, even in the Detroit / Ann Arbor area; there literally were only a handful of hotels big enough to host an approximately 400 person conference with one big ballroom and seven breakout rooms—and the biggest (the Marriott at the RecCen in downtown Detroit) had made it clear they were already long-booked with bigger, regular clients. As a point of comparison, Minneapolis (where LOEX 2019 was held) had more suitable “big” conference hotel options than the entire state of Michigan. So after a long search, when we selected the Ypsi Marriott in 2018 as our location, we knew we had to be thoughtful to make it work as proper LOEX hotel venue (e.g., the only reasonable overflow hotel had just opened in 2019). Thus, on the first Tuesday in March, I made the short drive out to Ypsilanti (I live 20 minutes away) to meet Molly (WCC is based in Ypsi) to review our options—we knew we could definitely fit 400 people, but could we comfortably fit 425? And would it even matter?

At the time “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” were slowly but surely creeping onto everyone's radar, but due to our country's almost complete lack of preparation at the national level, the average person (e.g., me) had little real idea what would come next. I had spent February warily watching numbers in other countries, specifically South Korea, trying to understand how/if it could be put under control (yes) and wondering whether that would apply to the United States and specifically, Michigan (unfortunately, no). Michigan wouldn't confirm its first case of COVID-19 until March 10, but of course, it was actually in the state long before that date.

But I didn't know that as Molly and I walked around the Marriott's lobby and hallways. As we wandered, I nosed around for the source of the smell and after a bit of thinking, realized what it was—the hotel was bleaching many parts of the hotel on a more regular basis. This, along with the large bottles of hand sanitizer outside each conference room for the (irony-alert) medical group meeting there, left us increasingly concerned, even while we pondered how certain spaces could be laid out to fit a few extra people. As we sat on large chairs by the lobby fire place and discussed options to accommodate potential extra people, I mentioned...“I think we also need to plan on what happens if we don't have a conference at all.”

### Things Happen Slowly, Then All At Once

Once I got back to the office, I checked my email (no uptick in cancellations from normal) and our reservation list of hotel rooms (still sold out). However, on March 5, I got my first email notifying me “Due to recent concerns over Coronavirus (COVID-19), our college has suspended travel for all its employees through August 2020.” Uh oh; there it was. Then, three days later, our next cancellation (though not necessarily due to COVID). And then one the next day. On March 10, it became increasingly clear things would need to change.

I was notified by (coincidentally) the co-chair of the LOEX 2021 committee that his university system in California had cancelled “all non-essential travel” through May 31, 2020. On that same day, Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced the first two confirmed cases in the state. Not coincidentally, I started receiving once every hour or two cancellation emails—from both presenters and attendees—that they could no longer attend due to travel restrictions. The LOEX board meeting I had planned for later that month to discuss COVID options seemed a lot further away than I had thought.

The next two weeks were an almost complete blur that I won't recount here as we all went through it in one way or another—classes cancelled, Rudy Gobert, airport restrictions, Tom Hanks, confusion over testing, institutions at first discouraging hand shakes, then eliminating physical presence completely from many venues. By the time on March 23 I had confirmed (after many discussions with LOEX's board and lawyer) with the Ypsilanti Marriott that we were cancelling the conference, due to from Governor Whitmer's shutdown order, they informed me they completely understood—and that I didn't have to, per the contract, physically mail the cancellation letter to the hotel as there would be no one there to receive it.

### Deciding to Go Online—We Can Do It!

Cancelling the in-person conference was one thing—what about our conference program (e.g., 68 breakout sessions) that we had worked so hard to solicit and select, and presenters had taken the time to prepare? The co-chairs and I decided we wanted to live up, as best we could, to the conference theme: *We Can Do It! Building the Best in Library Instruction*. I had developed experience with online sessions by doing a few LOEX “Encore” sessions after each conference since 2008 and while doing 10 times the usual amount would be a major undertaking, we decided (along with the rest of local committee) it could be done with proper planning and follow-through.

But it wasn't just up to us; we needed to ask our presenters. If they had decided they were too busy, not interested, or otherwise not available, that would have been that. Fortunately, the vast majority were interested—in fact, many were excited. Those that declined typically had the valid concern that their session was constructed to be in person (e.g., many of our Interactive Workshops) and there was not a feasible way to do it online. Once we knew we easily had enough presenters, we let our attendees know the show would go on—in an online form.

As part of the shift, we decided early on we would not be able to do poster presentations, lightning talks, roundtables, or pre-conference workshop (see next section for explanation). That left the 1) plenary talk—and fortunately, Kaetrena Davis Kendrick agreed she would still be able to give her talk on “**The Power of Creativity: Leveraging CAN DO in Library Practice & Leadership**,” from her home in South Carolina—and 2) Fifty-four breakout sessions from over 100 presenters representing over 50 institutions from all over North America. With that program, and considering everything else going on, would people still want to attend? And would it be a success?

## How It Went and Lessons Learned

In short, yes—the conference was a success, a somewhat amazing one considering the circumstances. Programs started and ended on schedule, and every scheduled session occurred. The reviews from our survey were overall quite positive from both the presenters and the attendees, and we did not have any significant technology problems. But what in particular went well and what could go better next time? Let’s look at some lessons learned.

### 1) *Focus on the Essentials*

LOEX has expanded its offerings over the years, adding Grad Student Posters, Lightning Talks, a Pre-Conference Workshop, Pre-Conference Activities, and Roundtable Discussions. None of those were offered at LOEX 2020 Online.

This was not because you can’t do some of these online (e.g., we will be doing Student Posters and Roundtables for LOEX 2021) but there simply wasn’t time to figure out how to properly prep those more ancillary sessions \*and\* conduct the major part of the conference, which are the breakout sessions. During a stressful, short timeline, focus is key. Except for myself, LOEX is run by volunteers, and I wanted to be as respectful of possible of their time during an unknowable, scary event like a pandemic. Also, beyond time available as a committee, there wasn’t time available on the schedule—we were fortunate to have so many breakout session presenters agree to present that literally every single available time slot was filled; there was simply no room for any additional synchronous sessions, such as Lightning Talks.

### 2) *Most People Made the Shift to Present and/or Attend*

As discussed, the large majority of breakout session presenters were more than willing to shift gears and present their material online—occasionally with a good deal of changes, but not typically. Our initial expectation was only 60% would make the switch, so having 80% do so was great, though it did make scheduling a bit more challenging (we managed).

For non-presenter attendees, while almost 150 people cancelled (four to five times the normal amount), over 150 people took their place, with over 100 of them coming from a “second-chance” registration we opened just two weeks before the conference. In the end, we had 430 attendees. Our guess for why so many people wanted to attend was the quality of the sessions that they saw being offered, though certainly there might have been a portion of folks wanting/needing to use professional development money that had already been budgeted and with cancellations of many other conferences, LOEX 2020 was a reasonable, worthwhile option.

### 3) *Interactivity is Possible, but Limited, Online*

Of the 14 sessions (half of which were “Interactive Workshops”) that did not make the transition from in-person to online, by far the biggest reason for doing so was because the expectation was (both by LOEX and the presenters) that their session would have significant interactivity—think-pair-share, hands-on group work, kinesthetic activity, etc—and that just wasn’t possible online. Even the now-familiar Zoom “breakout room” couldn’t be a help—LOEX sessions typically have 50 or more attendees (and sometime well over 100), so sending 100 people into 25 unmoderated breakout rooms would be a recipe for disaster. In fact, it’s why Zoom “Webinar” platform (what LOEX was using) doesn’t offer that option.

However, in certain cases, presenters were able to modify their session to make it a bit less interactive but still deliver upon the core of what they originally planned. LOEX assisted in this process by Amanda and I meeting in April with each individual group for which we had interactivity concerns based upon our reading of their session descriptions (about 15 sessions in all) and we were consistently impressed by the creativity and flexibility of the presenters. So through the use of Google Jamboard, YouTube, AWW App, PollEverywhere, chat applications, and more, these sessions stayed on the schedule. Based on session evaluation, while everything didn’t work perfectly, attendees were overall quite satisfied.

### 4) *Take Your Time (But Not Too Much!) and Choose the Right Technology*

Speaking of technology, choosing a platform to host the online conference was extremely critical. Now a household name on par with “Kleenex” and “Google,” back in March, “Zoom” was just another tech company with a zippy name. However, LOEX needed capable, relatively easy to use video conferencing, and fast—otherwise, there would be no LOEX 2020. While LOEX had used WebEx for LOEX Encore virtual sessions for the past five years, that product was a bit expensive and I had found their tech support lacking. So after sitting through virtual sales calls and live demos in early April of Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting, and Zoom—with the crucial help of committee member Bill Marino—we chose Zoom based on price (the lowest), capabilities (similar across the board), and ease-of-use (most intuitive and easiest to launch). While not perfect (e.g., recordings of a few sessions inexplicably took weeks to show up), it performed essentially as promised, and we will be using it again for LOEX 2021.

### 5) *Prepping Presenters and Setting Them Up for Success is Essential*

Once we had chosen Zoom, we had to make every reasonable effort to make sure presenters were ready to use it, along with any other tools that could make their online sessions more compelling. To that end, we scheduled in late April half-hour “Sound Checks” where a volunteer from LOEX could review with each group a 10-point checklist (e.g., how to use Zoom features; review the session’s timeline; discuss best practices for online presenting). While this might seem unnecessary for some, especially as people gain more experience, we definitely plan on continuing this in some form due to the positive feedback we received from presenters and the significant number of issues we headed off before the conference actually started.

(LOEX 2020 Report...continued on page 17)

(LOEX 2020.Report..Continued from page 3)

6) **Prepping Moderators and Setting Them Up for Success — That’s Essential, Too!**

For in-person conferences, LOEX spends time briefly emailing, and then meeting with about 10-15 minutes on-site, all volunteer “room moderators” (aka “hosts,” “coordinators,” or “convenors”). These folks provide eyes & ears in every meeting room for the conference committee and also critical help for the presenters (e.g., getting tech support if there are problems). For online conferences, moderators are even more important, due to the increased reliance on technology, and thus requires even more training. With that in mind, while for in-person conferences we typically have a range of moderators—from freshly-scrubbed grad students to grizzled veterans like myself—for the online conference, we went solely with experienced moderators. We needed people who not only knew Zoom & online presenting, but also how to skillfully moderate a session by interjecting questions & insights when appropriate. In addition, moderators needed to be able to ensure the presenter (especially if they were solo) was aware of all questions that attendees had in the chat box, while also monitoring for tech issues. Thus, we had a 1.5 hour prep session where moderators could ask questions and review training materials we created. Since LOEX 2020 had a max of four simultaneous sessions for each time block, our eight total moderators allowed us to have each person only need to do two sessions a day. Moderating is not quite as energy-intensive as presenting, but we didn’t want tired moderators. Also, having them do two consecutive sessions (e.g., either 10am and 12pm or 2pm and 4pm) reduced complexity by limiting the number of “hand-offs” necessary from one Zoom room to another.

7) **Online is Good, But Can’t (Totally) Replace In-person**

The online sessions, overall, went very well. The reviews were quite good and every single session went off as scheduled. However, as was noted in many of the positive reviews, people were a) very thankful to LOEX, the committee, and the presenters for still having the conference during a pandemic and b) looking forward to attending an in-person event as soon as possible. I know the feeling.

As mentioned earlier, there were many sessions & events that just weren’t possible in an online format, and it was disappointing not to be able to have them be a part of the conference. So while it is nice to have the significant reduction in cost enabled by an online conference, and not have to worry about travel, hotel rooms, air conditioning capabilities in meeting rooms, food allergies, parking issues and more, LOEX still plans on focusing on in-person conferences in the future. One key indicator of this was that I was more tired at the end of LOEX 2020 than I had been for any previous conference—and I hadn’t left my house! What was missing is the energy that you get from people in a communal setting, not to mention the serendipitous hallway and “in-between” conversations you have with people you haven’t seen in awhile or are meeting for the first time. Much has been written about the pros & cons of in-person meetings, so I won’t belabor the point, except to say that while we have to make the best out of an unprecedented situation (and it still can be very good and hopefully will be made better for LOEX 2021 by the more communal activities, like Roundtables), I look forward to LOEX holding in-person conferences again (supplemented by online activities) as soon as soon as safely possible. Fingers-crossed.

- - - - -

For more information about the conference, and the PowerPointPoints and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at <http://loexconference.org/2020/breakout-session-materials/>