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MRA 2021 Conference Reflections

by Jill Erfourth, Charlie Barshaw, Amy Romanowski,
and Heather Jensen



Jill Erfourth



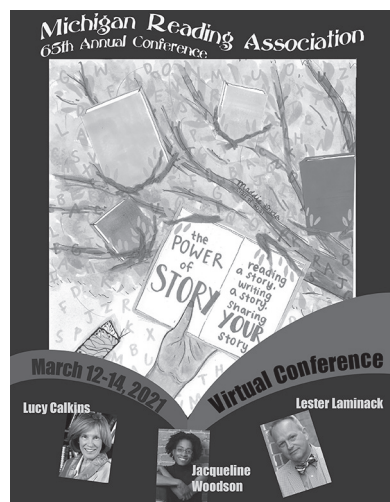
Charlie Barshaw



Amy Romanowski



Heather Jensen



During the weekend of March 12-14, 2021, hundreds of educators from Michigan and beyond gathered – in virtual spaces – to celebrate “The Power of Story.” Conference organizers, including MRA Vice-President Jill Erfourth, coordinated nearly 60 sessions using the web-based platform of Whova with Zoom meeting rooms to host our 65th annual conference. Here, four of our board members – Jill Erfourth, Charlie Barshaw, Amy Romanowski, and Heather Jensen – share their reflections on the experience of planning for and gathering in community for this unique MRA conference.

“Determined, Inspired, and Committed” - Jill Erfourth, Conference Chair and President-Elect

The Power of Story couldn't have been more fitting for this year's conference. Stories have lifted us up, and stories have brought us to tears. The power is the connection between each story shared, whether through a book, a conversation, a presentation, an email, a text, or social media. I have to admit, I was pretty nervous about how well-received this conference would be and if it would still be as inspiring as it has been every year of our traditional in-person format. With so many brilliant and dedicated MRA members working behind the scenes, the conference well exceeded my expectations! It was incredible to feel as if I was in the living rooms of the keynote speakers one-on-one. I was not expecting that emotion at all! It felt intimate at times and brought me to tears listening to the most amazing story-telling voice of Lester Laminack and the inspiring and passionate words of Jaqueline Woodson and Lucy Calkins.

Jacqueline Woodson and Lester Laminack reminded us that the power of story serves as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, as coined by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop. As educators, we must ensure that work is at the forefront of our classrooms. Dr. Kim Parker

reminded us that it is not enough to have diverse books in our classrooms. The real work is having the conversations where we elevate student voices, build community, empathy, and understanding. I will continue to learn and engage in these conversations at my schools and district. There were so many inspiring sessions not only on the power of story but, just as importantly, how we continue to accelerate literacy learning for ALL students. One of the best parts of the virtual conference is that I can still go back and view sessions I didn't get to attend and can go back to watch them again.

Each year I think THAT was the best conference yet, then the next year I say the same thing. When I reflect on that weekend, the theme of the conference, and the many great sessions, it reminds me how grateful I am for this opportunity MRA continues to offer. I have never felt more determined, inspired, and committed to doing this hard work of being an educator! Thank you to all of our amazing speakers for helping us learn and grow to continue that work. It has never been more important!

“Not only able to pull off a virtual conference, but to excel at it” – Charlie Barshaw, Innovations Co-Chair

I shouldn't even be here.

My wife Ruth is an author/illustrator of children's books, and we were grateful to be invited to present at the conferences before rooms full of teachers. Then Ruth was brought on as a liaison to the children's book writers, and finally, because I was always hanging around, I too was asked to join the board. For years I scrambled, worked on marketing, did some writing for the blog, even did a few presentations. But when the call came to write up and publicize this year's featured speakers, I found my purpose. Putting together short biographies of the presenters was simple. I'd written for newspapers and magazines. I knew how to punch up a headline and conduct research. And much of the information was already compiled, thanks to the presenters themselves and the MRA staff.

But what floored me was the sheer number of experienced educators and activists, authors and illustrators, all working for literacy. There were so many quality presenters, I went from posting three times a week, to seven times a week. Finally, the day before the event, I highlighted another dozen presenters that I hadn't mentioned yet.

And why is that a big deal? This was the 65th annual conference. The Michigan Reading Association has been promoting reading and writing and creativity and literacy for students for generations. Many of today's teachers learned to love books, likely followed the siren's call to teaching, because their teachers were inspired by an MRA conference or program.

I am thrilled that they were not only able to pull off a virtual conference, but to excel at it.

And I am honored to be part of this grand tradition.

“We are all lifelong learners, no matter what the platform” – Amy Romanowski, Great Lakes/Great Books Co-Chair

The key takeaway from the conference was the fact that we are all lifelong learners and no matter what the platform, we will continue to strive to be better and do better as educators.

I want to help students use the power of story to grow their understanding of the world around us. There are many avenues in which to help students. The options are limitless. There is something for everyone. It is finding what works best for each learner and building on those skills.

I will continue to use the power of story to enhance the learning opportunities for my students. Whether it is a research project, a comprehension skill, or a speaking and listening skill, we all have stories to share and through those stories, I will help my students gain a deeper understanding of themselves as learners.

“[To] feel seen and valued as an educator” – Heather Jensen, Great Lakes/Great Books Co-Chair

The Power of Story Virtual Conference made me feel seen and valued as an educator for the first time in a long time. The sessions were inspiring and timely. I love that my learning has continued through the on-demand availability of the sessions. It has rekindled my passion for learning and teaching! It was great to connect with so many others who share our love for literacy. I have already implemented several of the strategies in my own learning community with amazing results.

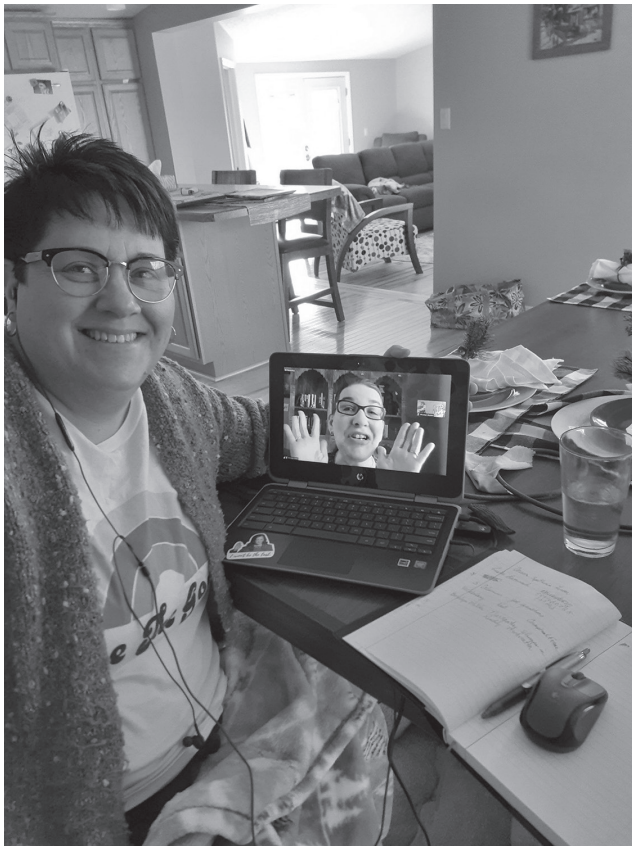


Photo of Heather Jensen participating in the MRA virtual conference during Donalyn Miller's session (Photo courtesy of Heather Jensen)

As of the date of this publication, the 2022 MRA Conference is schedule to be an in-person event. We welcome you to follow updates on the event at MRA's website, <michiganreading.org>.

