

In Memory of Dr. Halcyon Lawrence

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As many across technical and professional communication know, on October 29, 2023 we lost Dr. Halcyon Lawrence, a wonderful and consequential colleague, teacher, and scholar. The sense of loss—to the discipline and to our personal lives—was immediate and long-lasting, leading to many remembrances, including tributes in *Communication Design Quarterly* and *Technical Communication and Social Justice*, as well as the establishment of an annual scholarship from ATTW in her memory.

The two of us had nearly a decade to experience Halcyon as a colleague—since 2015 when we interviewed her for a position as a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow in the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Institute of Technology. We hired her, and she stayed with us until she completed her postdoc work and was hired at Towson University. We stayed in touch after she left Georgia Tech; we eventually co-authored an article published in the Fall 2022 issue of *Programmatic Perspectives*. The article, “Sustainable Collaboration: A Co-taught, Client-based Course Sequence Integrating Computer Science and Technical Communication,” captures the highlights of a multi-year project in which Halcyon played a central role—as a course developer, project leader, and teacher.

On her LinkedIn page, Halcyon described her professional self this way:

I am a technical communicator with expertise in usability research, instructional design, and training and development. As a consultant, I have worked on usability research projects with CITI, bSwift and NNMA. As an academic, I conduct research into linguistic issues in the design of speech technology, social networks and language variation, speech intelligibility and computer-mediated communication, and emotional speech research.

To limit Halcyon to this brief description, of course, threatens to hide what made her so special and to limit the impact she had on so many lives. Indeed, the problem with categories is that they have boundaries; one of the things that characterized Halcyon was that for her, boundaries overlapped, merged, melded. For her, boundaries were flexible, malleable.

From our points of view, Halcyon’s breaking down of boundaries in the classroom, in her research, and in her community engagement was precisely what made

her special in the context of a university writing and communication program. Ultimately, not only did she participate in that program, but she helped make it better through her leadership, mentoring, and relationship-building. Empathy infused every interaction—her awareness of her own connections, commitments, and responsibilities led naturally to her awareness of the connections, commitments, and responsibilities of those around her. She was aware, in a way that is all too rare, that the connections of others were as important to them as her connections were to her. She always asked after Andy's daughter and Rebecca's husband while speaking of "home"—her native Trinidad and Tobago—as if it were just across the hall.

Halcyon brought this sense of connection and responsibility into the classroom by lowering the boundaries between the classroom and the community outside the academy. She believed teaching was "broadly premised on the social constructivist notion that the classroom environment can and should be modeled on real-world environments that allow students to encounter realistic workplace issues and challenges." She was successful in implementing her philosophy. When Andy observed her teaching many years ago in the large (50 students in 10 teams) tech comm class co-taught with computer science, he noted the ways Halcyon made expert knowledge real to her students.

After reviewing a usability script, she asked for student volunteers to practice and model the usability process, and then responded to questions. In short, Dr. Lawrence handled the pedagogical situation—a class much larger than writing-class norms—with a well-structured lesson that expertly engaged and spoke to all of those students.

Indeed, every semester in their end-of-course evaluations, students gave Halcyon high marks for the clarity of her explanations, her ability to communicate ways to succeed, her respect for students, her enthusiasm, her ability to stimulate interest, her availability, the helpfulness of her feedback, and her overall effectiveness.

Halcyon's relationship- and community-building extended to her scholarship—both in the *how* (often through collaborative work) and in the *why* (to speak to the ways technologies may ignore the needs of its users). In a self-assessment for one of her annual reviews, Halcyon wrote that "Collaboration is the cornerstone of my scholarship....I am working with colleagues in the digital humanities, law, and computer science in the problem space of end user license agreements." Hal implemented her philosophy in individual and coauthored work, often focusing on usability studies, especially emphasizing equity on behalf of those who are marginalized. She was successful in her research and scholarship, publishing in a range of peer-reviewed journals (*Computers & Composition*, 2019; *Communication Design Quarterly*, 2018; *Programmatic Perspectives*, 2022; *Scholarship and Practice of Undergraduate Research*, 2000; and *Technical Communication and Social Justice*, 2024) and edited collections (Cambridge University Press, 2013; MIT Press, 2021; Utah State University Press, 2019; and WAC Clearinghouse, 2021).

To build community in the ways Halcyon did—as she did at every moment of her life—is extraordinary. We are grief-stricken by Halcyon's death, but simultaneously,

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we are joyful because of her friendship, her spirit, her contributions to our professional and personal lives—and because of the real marks of her life we see in our program and in the relationships built there and sustained long after. As program leaders, scholars, faculty—as humans—we all can take Halcyon’s commitment to community as a model: to be open and caring, joyous and curious, empathetic and committed not only to ourselves but to those around us. To be truly invested in each other.

Author Information

Rebecca E. Burnett (PhD, Carnegie Mellon) recently retired as Director of Writing and Communication at Georgia Tech where she held an Endowed Professorship in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication and is now Professor Emerita. Her continuing research includes arts and humanities, collaboration, leadership, multimodality, risk, technical communication, and visual rhetoric.

Andy Frazee (PhD, University of Georgia) serves as the director of the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Tech and supervises the teaching, research, service, and professional development of Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellows. Frazee's scholarship examines writing program administration, pedagogy, and faculty development.