

New Frontiers: Exploring the Power and Possibilities of the Unconference as a Transformative Approach to Faculty Development

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In the spirit of exploration, this paper discusses the what, why and how of unconferencing and explores its implications as a transformative approach to faculty development in higher education. The authors define an unconference faculty development experience as: a less-structured opportunity for participants to learn and grow by sharing individual expertise in a variety of ways that reflect participant interests, preferences, skill sets, and needs. This paper explores the distinctiveness of unconferencing as compared with traditional conference structures, presents a rationale and theoretical underpinnings of this practice, and suggests general guidelines that address some of the pragmatic and logistical issues that inform successful unconference events. Three cases are examined to contextualize the what, why, and how of unconferencing as a dynamic and grassroots approach to envisioning faculty engagement and development.

“**I**nnovation happens when minds come together to share ideas” (Ferriter & Provenzano, 2013, p. 19). The commitment to evolving ideas is a cornerstone of academia, informing the varied teaching and learning spaces we occupy as well as the professional spaces where we collaborate, share, and learn: from faculty lounges to hallways, from conferences to journals, from handwritten correspondences to emails, blogs, and tweets. 21st century technologies continue to multiply, affording us an ever expanding arena of modalities and methods to refine and impart our intellectual craftsmanship as scholars and as faculty developers. Faculty developers can benefit from the insights, methods, and examples of the unconference as a powerful platform for imagining and crafting dynamic and potentially transformative faculty learning experiences (West, 2012).

The unconference is powerful because of the rate at which ideas can be generated and shared; because the unconference celebrates autonomy and encourages the emergence of our personal narratives; because the unconference challenges traditional notions of learning space redefining the locations, relationships and structures by which we communicate and build understanding; and because of the unconference’s democratic-participatory structure (Association for Learning Technology; Kassner, 2014). The unconference is an arena of possibilities that organically build off the very foundations that drive those interested in developing

knowledge to connect with others. Conceived as such, the unconference can substantively inform and inspire new directions for the future of faculty development so that the field continues to remain programmatically relevant, agile, and exciting.

With the spirit of exploration in mind, this paper discusses the *what, why, and how* of unconferencing and probes its implications as a transformative approach to faculty development in higher education. The paper examines theory that informs the unconference, canvasses resources and tools that can be used to organize and build unconference learning experiences, and highlights ways the unconference can prompt critical reflection among faculty. To this end, best practices and strategies are offered, including reference to web-based resources that may assist in preparations for unconference experiences. Moreover, the authors discuss the importance of and methods for networking stakeholders as a practical means by which to set strong foundations for unconferencing to take place and become valued on institutional campuses. Three iterations of unconferencing as modes for substantively engaging faculty are examined as a practical basis for considering implications of the unconference on the future of faculty development.

What is an Unconference and How is it Different?

“‘Unconferences’ are a non-traditional form of professional activity defined by the absence of many conventional conference structures” (Carpenter, 2015, p. 78). Stated differently, “‘Unconferences’ are voluntary, informal learning experiences that reject traditional conference structures such as a predetermined slate of speakers and sessions” (Boule, 2011). Unconferences manifest themselves in different ways, yet all share common principles and structures. At its core, unconferece events are participant driven. From topics to participation, from goals to agendas, the unconferece works to organically surface interests and problems relevant to those attending, provide a place for them to work, and relies on the contributions of each participant to move group defined goals forward. The unconferece approach is in direct contrast to traditional academic conference structures that exemplify more didactic modes of engagement.

“To a large extent, attending a [traditional] conference can be a passive experience” (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015, p. 2). The roots of dominant conference formats date back to the 1660’s when travel and copies of physical manuscripts posed challenging obstacles to sharing knowledge. A formal presentation of ideas followed by discussion were efficient and effective methods for the dissemination of ideas. This format continues to dominate conference settings despite theory and technology that point toward more meaningful methods of learning and participation.

Traditional conference formats face many logistical challenges that have epistemological implications that the unconferece format seeks to confront. First, timetables at traditional conferences are extremely tight and “there is little room for flexibility or improvisation in response to questions raised” (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015, p. 2). Consequently, discussions tend to be formalized and highly constrained if not regulated. For the more formal academic conference where papers are submitted as part of conference proceedings and read to the audience, time constraints limit the opportunity for presenters and participants to learn from feedback articulated during the question and answer period. It is not surprising that in such contexts “discussion” takes the form of a defense rather than a problem-solving approach to knowledge development, thereby further limiting the scholarly exchange and co-development of ideas. “The lecture type format can imply a realist epistemology, treating knowledge as a commodity to be passed on to, rather than constructed by, those listening” (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015, p. 2). If faculty developers view those with whom

they work as learners who, like students, build insight and understanding through active engagement with ideas and methods, then a little theory can go a long way (Perkins, 2009).

Theoretical Considerations

Constructivism and social constructivism, as theories of learning and intellectual development, can be useful lenses to think through faculty learning experiences in unconferece formats. Constructivist theory suggests that learners build understanding and insights through direct engagement with their experiences and ideas within a learning context. Instructional manifestations often involve challenging learners to make intuitive connections, accurate or not, with content ideas and problems in an attempt to increase motivation, facilitate authentic engagement, and deepen understanding of subject matter as well as one’s self (Bruner, 1996). Social constructivism, more specifically, positions deep learning through direct experience and reflection within collaborative group contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Unconferece events function under the assumption that constructivist and social constructivist approaches to faculty development will result in more authentic and substantive engagement because problems, issues, and challenges (1) emerge from participant interests and concerns, (2) directly and democratically engage participants in the problems framing and solving process, and (3) foster collegial connections that expand one’s professional network increasing opportunities for conversations to continue once the event has concluded. Just as constructivism and social constructivism help position unconferece events within broader theoretical contexts, designing faculty enhancement experiences (Stabile & Ritchie, 2013) with an unconferece approach becomes more theoretically applicable to the future of faculty development when coupled with a framework for connected learning.

The MacArthur Foundation, the Connected Learning Research Network and Digital Media & Learning Research Hub, and the Connected Learning Alliance have created a definition and framework for connected learning that is useful for understanding how certain activities function within various unconferece settings. Connected learning is “a mode of learning that holds out the possibility of reimagining the experience of education in the information age. It draws on the power of today’s technology to fuse...people’s interest, friendships and academic achievements through experiences laced with hands-on production, shared purpose and open networks” (<http://connectedlearning.tv/infographic>). Connected learning is “an approach to education. It is not a learning theory. It is not a specific set of teaching

techniques, and it is not bound by specific educational environments or contexts. Connected learning is a set of powerful design principles that engage, empower, and equip [learners] to learn effectively, purposefully, and continuously throughout their lives" (ALT Lab, "Defining Connected Learning." n.d). These design principles are: interest-powered, peer-supported, academically-oriented, production-centered, shared purpose, and openly-networked. Connected learning provides a useful frame from which to examine unconference purposes and activities in the digital age because it is predicated on the belief that those who facilitate learning, despite its form, must work to maximize the opportunities to celebrate the intellectual autonomy and contribution of each participant as well as emphasize the importance of establishing professional connections for the purposes of ideation and problem solving.

Together, constructivism, social constructivism and connected learning help one consider the theoretical and practical dimensions of an unconference approach to faculty development. Schuyman, Peters, and Olsen (2013) capture the constructive and collaborative power organic faculty and faculty developer interactions can have in what they term the cocreation of value (CCV). They write, "Cocreation occurs when two stakeholders are intentionally brought together to develop something of stronger value than either one could create or provide alone" (p. 22). When principles and methods of an unconference approach are utilized as one option for programing, faculty development embraces the notion and goal of cultivating substantive "thought partnerships" (Nugent, 2016).

Practical Considerations and Best Practices

The unconference evolved from Harrison Owen's concept of Open Space Technology (OST) (<http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>). The concept itself is a technology in an anthropological sense, which is "anything that changes the way a society behaves, constructs, or is structured" (Boule 2011). What Owen was trying to accomplish was changing the way meetings and conferences were structured in order to promote more open communication among the participants or attendees. The structure of an OST event typically follows the following sequence or flow: the marketplace, the bulletin board, the circle, and breathing. Participants start by creating a marketplace of ideas, which then moves into organizing in a schedule organically based on interest. The image of the circle is meant to reinforce the ethos that all ideas are treated and considered equally, while participants are encouraged walk away, clear their head, or breathe, when they need to.

There are four basic rules of an OST event, and these are embraced by the unconference movement:

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. When it starts is the right time.
4. When it's over, it's over.

As abstract as these "rules" are, their purpose is to make explicit the assumptions that inform the expectations and participatory behaviors that characterize traditional academic conferences so that they can be properly reframed and managed. The unconference does not have a set schedule or program based around a handful of experts; everyone at an unconference is considered an expert, equal to the others around them, and they create the program, topics, and activities themselves during their time together.

The ethos and philosophy of the unconference is directly in opposition to most conference and professional development experiences of faculty, rigidly scheduled and planned around a small number of experts, typically targeting, if not requiring, a specific audience attendance. Particularly challenging as well is the erasure of the typical hierarchical structures prominent in academia; the full professor is considered equal to the graduate student and to the administrative assistant and to the provost. For many of us working in higher education, as well as the various stakeholders therein, an unconference would appear to be chaotic, inefficient, and a waste of time. This perception can be a challenge to faculty developers looking to incorporate unconferences in their slate of opportunities for faculty. Expectations informed by solidified cultural norms can present obstacles for fostering authentic faculty engagement.

Can faculty, who are often agenda driven, significantly benefit from the unconference experience? In other words, can faculty development programs that adopt an unconference approach be successful given the existing expectations and assumptions informing more traditional interactions? As previously noted, unconferences can take many forms and lead in many directions. Some claim that an event is not an unconference if said event has a theme or pre-established facilitators (Joel, 2012). However, this situation is not often the case when contextualizing unconference approaches within faculty development. If we assume that faculty arrive at events with preconceptions and expectations about what to expect and what they will or will not gain, then the presence of faculty developers can be invaluable assets for helping faculty reorient expectations so that they can benefit from the organic and authentic approach to the learning experience. In other words, an unconference

structure can be self-defeating if the participants are unaware of the goals of and approaches to the learning experience. Although this danger is true for all faculty development programs and events, it is particularly relevant to the unconventional style of the unconference.

Misaligned expectations and unexamined assumptions are just as much a barrier to faculty development events as they are to any course and classroom. For example, if one expects a handout complete with PowerPoint slides, relevant commentary, and additional resources, then one's experience at an unconference may seem unsatisfied. Additionally, if one is looking for a particular solution to a predefined problem, then once again one's goal may not be met. If one expects to quietly listen to a speaker with little or no direct engagement with other attendees, then the highly interactive nature of an unconference faculty development event may prove disorienting and possibly intimidating. Nonetheless, it does not mean that such an approach is impossible, ineffective, or of no value. Scott Berkun (2006) has an excellent and concise outline of various ways to address and structure an unconference event in response to many of the practical concerns faculty developers may have. Moreover, organizations such as THATCamp, EdCamp and POD have successfully organized unconference events that point to programming opportunities for CTLs around the world.

Given the resistance that might be present from faculty participants of an unconference, there are a number of strategies or techniques that you can use to help stimulate discussion, break down barriers, and ease faculty into this unfamiliar approach to faculty development. Both Boule (2011) and the Open Space World website list activities such as Birds of a Feather sessions, Dotmocracy, Fishbowl, and Lightning Talks or Speed Geeking as ways to constructively facilitate a productive unconference environment. Many techniques found in the well-known faculty development book, *Collaborative Learning Techniques* by Barkely, Major, and Cross (2014), can be adapted to help facilitate unconference sessions.

Birds of a feather: group formation around a common or shared question, goal, or problem.

Dotmocracy: After brainstorming ideas and posting them around the meeting space, participants vote with a number of dots, in any way they choose. For more information see dotmocracy.org.

Fishbowl: A discussion facilitation method that places a small number of people in a "fishbowl" to talk about an issue, with other listening on the outside, with a system to then rotate roles.

Lightning Talks: Like speed dating, people sit face to face and discuss an issue or question, or even just intro-

duce themselves, for a short period of time before moving on to the next person.

The most important, and perhaps most challenging, skill that an organizer of an unconference must possess is *flexibility*; the techniques and approaches used will vary based on the needs of the participants. Do not over-plan or assume participants' needs—this will most likely lead to a disappointing unconference experience. Be prepared to "go with the flow" and have multiple strategies to suggest in case they are needed. Finally, new digital platforms dramatically expand the modes of engagement that an unconference is ideally positioned to substantively utilize.

One element that has not yet been addressed is the use of technology in organizing and implementing an unconference. The use of technology is, like all tools, dependent on your participants and purpose. An unconference can be run with a few rooms and a whiteboard or stickie notes and pens. But, technology can be a powerful tool to connect participants before, during, and after the event. One example of how technology can enhance the unconference experience is how THATCamps are typically run. THATCamp stands for The Humanities and Technology Camp, largely (but not exclusively) targeting faculty and graduate students in higher education who are interested in learning technical skills and approaches that can be incorporated into their teaching and research. The website (THATCamp.org) allows anyone to create their own THATCamp, and automatically provides a subdomain for that camp (name.thatcamp.org) using wordpress. The main site populates their master calendar with the camp, and the organizers typically use social media to promote and attract attendees.

The individual unconference site has a registration page already set up, asking participants to create a profile so that others attending can get to know their fellow THATCampers. Also, once participants register, a user account is automatically created and they can contribute suggested session topics, questions, and other information. This activity allows for community to develop before the unconference begins. Once THATCamp starts, participants use the unconference site and other tools, such as Twitter, Google Docs, and Slack, to keep up-to-date on schedules, events, and to share notes and resources from the various sessions. These same tools are often used after the THATCamp concludes to maintain relationships developed while attending. Those attending bring their own devices, while the organizers ensure that there is wifi connectivity. Modern technology presents faculty developers with tremendous versatility in the ways we can connect with and organize learning experiences for faculty.

Derek Bruff (2011) discusses the way technology can further conversations and stimulate opportunities of serendipitous insight through the use of a conference or faculty development event backchannel. Conversations traditionally held in the hallways have become discussions held during an event using technological mediums such as Twitter. Participants are able to post questions, highlight and share important points, and link to additional resources in real time. Many conferences are actively promoting backchannel conversations, and much has been written extensively on its use as a learning tool in the classroom. The POD Network, the Lilly Conference and ALT Fest are a few examples where backchannel conversations are considered integral parts of their programming. The ethos and goals of unconfereing coupled with the dynamic and substantive use of modern technology further the opportunities for faculty developers to connect with their clientele in ways that are as fresh and interesting as they are challenging and engaging, and many of those in faculty development are embracing the possibilities.

Unconferences in Action: Three Examples

The model for unconferences as professional development was pioneered by the EdCamp movement. Started by a group of teachers in Philadelphia in 2009, with the first iteration offered in 2010, it has grown into a movement within K-12 professional development, with over 600 EdCamps having been held worldwide. It is now also a non-profit organization, the EdCamp Foundation, and has secured funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The NewSchool Seed Fund (<http://www.edcamp.org/learn-more>). Researchers have begun to take notice, notably Jeffery Paul Carpenter, who has shown through his research that this format of professional development is not only popular, but also effective (Carpenter & Linton, 2016; Carpenter, 2015).

THATCamp should serve as an inspirational example as to how successful unconferences can be with faculty in higher education. Started in 2008 at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, there have now been over 200 various iterations of the unconference at institutions around the world, with over 6000 educators and professionals in attendance. The authors of this essay hope to engage in further research into the impact that THATCamp has had on the participants, but anecdotally, THATCamp's influence on the teaching, research, and larger professional networks of the participants has been significant. This grassroots, networked, participant-

driven and sustained version of faculty development can serve as a model for us working in the field.

Organizations such as POD (The Professional Organizational Development Network) have embraced this networked and participant driven vision using the unconference approach to address issues related to faculty development. During its annual conference, POD simultaneously runs a series of unconference (POD-U) sessions. These sessions utilize a variety of facilitation approaches to loosely organize participants, including: Birds of a Feather, Lightning Talks, and a live Twitter stream. However, the conference sessions that are labeled POD-U mark a unique contribution to unconfereing and faculty development. POD-U sessions are participant-driven events. "You can create your own POD-U session or attend one created by someone else. These sessions are ideal for discussing challenges you are facing at your institution, sharing resources you have developed, discussing ideas or issues that emerge during the conference, solving a problem, developing new resources, sharing a personal talent, or simply meeting others with similar (and diverse!) interests" (POD Network Conference "Unconference" section, 2015).

The participant-driven approaches to conferencing that THATCamp, EdCamp and POD have sought to cultivate establish strong groundwork that can act as models for centers to design and facilitate substantive unconference learning experiences for faculty. For example, VCU's Academic Learning Transformation Laboratory (ALT Lab) offers an annual conference that significantly embeds unconference experiences. This event, called ALT Fest, works to inspire and engage faculty with the view to think innovatively about teaching, learning, scholarship and community. From exploring makerspaces, video production, and gaming to specialized workshops, spontaneous investigations, and a live backchannel Twitter stream, ALT Fest is an attempt to directly grapple with unconfereing and the power of networked learning as methods for grassroots, participant driven faculty engagement.

Implications for the Future of Faculty Development

CTLs continually struggle with faculty participation at scale when regularly operating under limited budgets, extreme time constraints, and shifting institutional initiatives. Traditional conferences and similarly organized faculty development events are well established and extremely valuable formats for communicating new ideas, advances in disciplinary scholarship, and meeting leaders within one's field. Similarly, traditional faculty development programs

rely and build on the structural familiarity that faculty have come to expect. These structures and formats, characterized by presentations and question and answer interaction, have become so much a part of the lexicon of higher education that the accompanying behavioral expectations for participation and engagement are often predictably limited, if not stagnant. The unconference format can be a powerful method to engage faculty in dynamic ways. The goals are simple: move people from passive recipients of information to active participants in its construction, development, and implementation. Such an approach can augment traditional conference formats and faculty development programs, affording additional modes of participation and opportunities for engaging with or developing ideas. In other words, the unconference can be a valuable guide for designing and facilitating faculty development experiences and programs at centers for teaching and learning (CTL).

Many faculty development programs are built on the very constructivist and social constructivist theories that inform unconference philosophy. Faculty Learning Communities (FLC's), book clubs, course design institutes, to name a few, are designed to help faculty learn through authentic, interest-based, and problem-based experiences. Technology provides further opportunities to help realize the transformative potential that connected learning advances. Collaborations on wiki's, faculty development projects like the Twitter Journal Club organized and facilitated by ALT Lab's Laura Gogia (@googleguacamole), or utilizing digital tools to capture faculty reflections asynchronously (Hale & Cates, 2016) are but a few examples of those who use the affordances of new technologies and the open web to press the limits of faculty engagement (Gogia & Warren, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper advances the position that the tenets of and approaches to unconferencing can be directly applied to the design and implementation of faculty development programs and events, that such an approach is feasible, important, and valuable in augmenting existing CTL best practices and traditional conference structures, and that the unconference approach will play an increasingly visible part in the future of faculty development within higher education. If we are able to reorient long standing expectations of faculty development and interaction, then organizing and facilitating unconference learning experiences are within the reach of any CTL event or program effort. As higher education becomes increasingly networked, CTLs have the opportunity to be leaders in the design and implementation of innovative learning experiences. Unconferencing is a

powerful approach to fostering dynamic and potentially transformative faculty enhancement experiences. Since this form of faculty development is in its nascent form, more research is needed, but we hope that this introduction provides a useful framework for incorporating the approach at your institution, allowing for a growing body from which to study its impact.

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