

“As if we were old family at a family reunion that hadn't been held for a long time.” Feminism and LIS: The Unconference

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Background

What is an unconference?

- ✦ Self-organizing
- ✦ Agenda created by participants
- ✦ Everyone actively contributes
- ✦ No talking heads
- ✦ Free or low cost

Unconference planners often cite four principles found in Harrison Owens' *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (3rd ed, 2008):

- ✦ Whoever comes is the right people.
- ✦ Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- ✦ Whenever it starts is the right time.
- ✦ When it's over, it's over.

The unconference at Milwaukee, *Out of the Attic and into the Stacks*:

- ✦ Emerged organically from several different gatherings of practitioners, students, and faculty in LIS.
- ✦ Funding from a range of sources.
- ✦ Scholarships to ensure participation.
- ✦ Pre-unconference wiki helped facilitate discussion and information sharing.
- ✦ Unposter session was a place to share our work.
- ✦ Comfortable and well appointed meeting space at the UW-Milwaukee



Is the unconference a good feminist strategy?

Unconferences have much in common with feminist organizing strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, such as:

- Consciousness-raising: Like the grassroots CR groups that launched the women's liberation movement, *Out of the Attic* brought women together in a safe space to share their hopes and frustrations and find common ground in their experiences as women.
- Cross-generational: Participants in *Out of the Attic* included working librarians, retired librarians, and masters and PhD students of LIS.
- Boundary-spanning: *Out of the Attic* offered an all-too-rare opportunity for academics and practitioners to have extended discussions and share knowledge.

The participants speak

The LIS Unconference was my first feminist event, and the first "conference" that I attended as an LIS student. I found the atmosphere collaborative, intelligent, quick-moving, and thoughtful and kind. It was refreshing to be an environment that valued the perspectives of both newcomers and experienced intellectuals and practitioners. - Charlotte Roh, GSLIS, UIUC

I loved the multi-generational aspect. As a professor, I spend a lot of time with students, but at the unconference we met on a level playing field. - Christine Jenkins, GSLIS, UIUC

At the unconference it was both exciting and reassuring to see so many young librarians and students who have a commitment to a feminist agenda. Sadly, the issues they face have not changed as much as one would have hoped since others of us began feminist work. Many of these young women are experiencing struggles parallel to those that women learned from in the last century. These young women have the disadvantage of facing those struggles having been told that equality has been attained and feminism is obsolete. What happened in between? It seems we neglected to explain that feminism is not a project with achievable goals and measurable outcomes – it is a radical, broad, and deep commitment to fundamental cultural change. Thank goodness these young women are smart and have great potential to become wise. - Hope Olson, SIS, UW-Milwaukee

I was inspired and challenged by the insights shared by feminist librarians, researchers, and students. Each person brought a unique perspective and enriched the dialogue.. – Adriana McCleer, SIS, UW-Milwaukee

I was surprised at how well the collective agenda planning worked. It was the best of feminist practice in action. I left with more critical questions than answers, and the conversations we had continue to come up in my daily work practice. I want more unconferences like this one! I really felt like I was part of something with the potential to change the way we do and think feminist LIS, and I can't wait for the next one. - Emily Drabinski, Librarian, Long Island University

I expected to be Underwhelmed at an UNconference, but was delighted with the UNusally high rate of participation of LIS faculty, students, and librarian practitioners and their UNabashed comments and ideas.- Phyllis Holman Weisbard, Librarian, UW System

Being an unconference newbie I was nervous. But everyone pitched in and we agreed upon a structure quickly. We became an engaged, engaging intergenerational mix of feminist practitioners, practitioners to be and scholars excited to be together and sharing ideas. - Michele Besant, SLIS, UW-Madison

It was just an energizing experience and also an affirming one. To be in the room with so many feminists of all ages and backgrounds, gay and straight, comfortable in who we were, as if we were old family at a family reunion that hadn't been held for a long time. It has helped me remember my feminist roots and to not let women, feminism and women's issues get lost in the fray, political or personal. So much of what is happening on the political front today is really a feminist issue. Although I don't think it is a good idea to call it a "war on women" (because it is too easy for the other side to make a mockery of that), in my heart, I do know that it is a war on women. But we have to couch it differently, yet still in a feminist context. - Chris Wagner, Librarian, Madison (WI) Public Library

One of the most exciting parts of the unconference for me was the ideas and thoughts shared among participants from every age group. Veteran librarians learned at the feet of graduate students and visa versa. Energizing! - Marge Loch-Wouters, Librarian, LaCrosse (WI) Public Library

What's next?

In her classic essay, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" [www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.com], Jo Freeman critiqued the women's liberation movement's valorization of leaderless women's groups as the ideal organizational form for the movement. "Unstructured groups may be very effective in getting women to talk about their lives; they aren't very good for getting things done...The end of consciousness-raising leaves people with no place to go, and the lack of structure leaves them with no way of getting there."

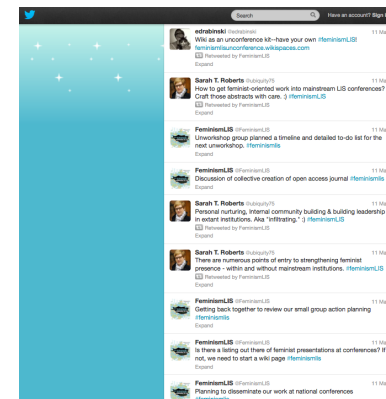
Out of the Attic generated many ideas for follow-on activities—including founding an open access journal, creating virtual space for sharing research and course syllabi, adding to the resource list, sponsoring more unconferences, and making presentations in mainstream scholarly and professional venues. But without an ongoing structure, it's incumbent upon the individual women to work through existing groups or to organize new groups to accomplish these dreams.

See the unconference wiki for more: <http://feminismlisunconference.wikispaces.com/Action+Plan>.

Twitter and the unconference

Twitter proved to be a useful communication tool at the unconference. Participants used it to share thoughts and information among the different breakout groups and with a broader public on the Web.

A selection from the Twitter feed - #feminismLIS:



Learn more

Boule, Michelle. *Mob Rule Learning: Camps, Unconferences, and Trashing the Talking Head*. Medford, NJ: CyberAge Books, 2011.

Lawson, Steve. *Library Camps and Unconferences*. [The Tech Set, vol. 8.] New York: Neal-Schuman, 2010.

Chow, Lisa, and Sandra Sajonas. *Unconferences: Guide on Unconferences and Tools, Resources and Tips for DIY Unconference*. URL: <http://libguides.metro.org/unconferences>

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- ✦ And, especially, the participants.

