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## **INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND LEARNING: A DELIBERATIVE APPROACH TO CONFERENCES**

Business school educational practices are increasingly criticized for their lack of inclusivity (Adamson, Kelan, Lewis, Śliwa, & Rumens, 2020; Stewart, Crary, & Humberd, 2008). The *#metoo* and *Black Lives Matter* movements have highlighted the need for management educators to be more inclusive towards the voices and perspectives of women, as well as racial and ethnic marginalized groups (Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, & Tienari, 2019; Bell, Berry, Leopold, & Nkomo, 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). Such research calls out the everyday sexism and racism that permeates much of the institutions of academia, which, it is argued, actively de-values the knowledge and experience of marginalized scholars and students. As Liu (2020: 122) has recently stated “The typical Business School degree reinforces imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, equipping graduates with the hegemonic values that they then identify and reproduce in their everyday lives at work and beyond”.

Calls for greater inclusivity chime with a central goal of Critical Management Education (CME) – to challenge exclusion in educational practices by transforming power imbalances between the educator and educated (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) and confront systemic inequality (Bell et al., 2021). As Chowdhury puts it “CMS researchers argue that marginalized groups encounter power/knowledge barriers that exclude them from participation in any decision-making in institutional settings” (2021: 289). Achieving this ambition relies upon increasing the diversity of voices who determine what ‘counts’ as knowledge, exemplified by calls to decolonize the management education curriculum (Chowdhury, 2021; Dar, Liu, Martinez Dy, & Brewis, 2021) by building an anti-racist classroom (Brewis, Dar, Liu, Martinez Dy, & Salmon, 2020) and creating learning environments that are more inclusive.

In order to realize this goal, CME scholars argue it is necessary to shift learning away from a “transmission model of teaching” (Giroux, 2011), built around a hierarchical mode of knowledge acquisition, which leads to “the propagation of a culture of conformity and the passive absorption of knowledge” (2011: 5) by (re)producing existing power relations and inequalities. In contrast, CME educators seek to change “the dynamics of power and control in the course and classroom” (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018: 524) in order to facilitate more inclusive learning environments. Whilst CME outlines the theoretical need for this shift, to date few attempts have been made to explore the practices involved in producing a more inclusive management education. This article examines one such attempt at inclusive knowledge exchange and creation: the unconference. The paper is guided by the following question: *what can we learn from unconferences in order to create more inclusive forms of deliberative exchange and learning in management education?*

Unconferences are a non-hierarchical, participant driven, peer-to-peer (Budd, Dinkel, Corpas, Fuller, Rubinat, Devos et al., 2015), agenda-less, self-managed meeting format (Wolf, Hansmann, & Troxler, 2011) that are purposefully designed to include a wide range of voices in deliberative learning and exchange (Owen, 2008). Based on four case studies of unconferences and 29 semi-structured interviews, our findings suggest unconferences provide a practical means of realizing the inclusive pedagogy that CME adherents desire (Giroux, 2011) through practices that can lead towards more equal power relations in knowledge creation. We argue unconferences offer implicit inclusivity by transforming the organizing structure of who can speak and what counts as knowledge in ways that challenge overt hierarchies and exclusion. Yet our findings also suggest caution in adoption of unconferences within management education, as even these horizontal practices conceal hidden hierarchies which shape knowledge creation in exclusionary ways.

We begin by critically reviewing the Habermasian foundations of CME, highlighting its assumptions about inclusion at individual, group and structural levels. Drawing on deliberative theory (Dryzek, 1990), particularly feminist deliberative theory (Fraser, 1990; Young, 1996), we argue for more explicit inclusive practices through collective curation of these events in order to increase the prominence of marginalized voices. We then explore conferences as sites of professional management education which reflect these phenomena in practice and consider unconferecing as an alternative approach to collective learning. We explore how unconferecing encourages a move: i) from exclusion towards inclusion of individual voices; ii) from hierarchical towards horizontal group learning and iii) from passive disengagement towards a spirit of engagement and inclusion. In the discussion, we consider the implications of our findings and offer insights from unconferecing to show how management education can become more inclusive.

### **CME and Inclusive Education**

Early proponents of CME argue that critical approaches to education should take place in a democratic and inclusive environment (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Inspired by deliberative theory, these scholars argue that education should resemble “a Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’” (Grey, Knights, & Willmott, 1996: 107) in which communication and debate flows between equals (Habermas, 1984). For Habermas, an ideal speech situation occurs when everyone: 1) has an equal opportunity to initiate or continue a discussion; 2) has equal opportunities to make claims, question, clarify, or defend them; and 3) is transparent in their feelings and intentions towards one another (Adams, 2006).

CME theorists advocate for this communicative model of inclusive deliberative exchange to be built into teaching and learning. They argue that hierarchical knowledge production can be transformed by collaborating “with managers in critically examining the challenges and problems with which they must work” (Reynolds & Vince, 2004: 445) by

using embodied and dialogical (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004), group (Mowles, 2017) and action learning (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Ultimately, they seek to transform power relations (Freire, 1970) in management education and to make it more inclusive (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996).

The central goal of the Habermasian approach is to place equality at the heart of educational practice. It assumes that by transforming patterns of interaction (adopting egalitarian norms and rules about who can speak and when), inclusion will follow. We call this approach *implicit inclusion*. Habermas does not assume, of course, that free and equal deliberative exchange will necessarily always happen – communicative distortions mean this would be too much to expect. Yet rather than demonstrating the impossibility of an ideal speech situation, these communicative exchanges are a basis for emancipatory change by providing a stimulus that participants can be used for improvement and development (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Moreover, by treating “ideal speech” as real, and presupposing its possibility, participants can envisage and work towards it in practice and, in doing so, include a wider array of voices in deliberative exchange. Habermasian theory influenced a subsequent generation of deliberative scholars to consider how deliberative exchange could be used to develop opportunities, capabilities, and resources to enable meaningful and long-lasting decision making (Bohman, 1997; Christiano, 1997; Dryzek, 1990).

However, as feminist scholars like Fraser (1990) and Young (1996) argue, the Habermasian approach to inclusivity fails to challenge hidden hierarchies and exclusions central to deliberative exchange at three levels. First, at an individual level, critics suggest Habermas privileges rational exchange – a form of communication favored by higher status groups. Iris Marion Young (1996: 120) claims that “by restricting their concept of democratic discussion narrowly to critical arguments, most theorists of deliberative democracy assume a culturally biased conception of discussion that tends to silence or devalue some people or

groups” (also see Cortese, 1990). Thus, the norms of deliberation for individuals – what is considered to be rational and “articulate” – privilege exchange that is dispassionate and formal. As Young explains, “[t]hese norms of “articulateness” however, must be learned; they are culturally specific, and in actual speaking situations in our society, exhibiting such speaking styles is a sign of social privilege” (1996: 124). There have been subsequent calls to encourage a wider and more explicitly inclusive array of communication which includes individuals across different social groups, backgrounds and statuses. This would enable, as Young (1999: 128) states, “participants [to] gain a wider picture of the social processes in which their own partial experience is embedded” (also see Contu & Willmott, 2003 for a discussion).

Second, at a group level, there is an assumption in Habermas’s framework that through incorporation of deliberative rules of exchange – including equality of opportunity to speak – a wider array of voices will be heard. In turn, it is assumed that those involved will learn from one another horizontally and fairly as a matter of course and in a manner that enables rational consensus. Fraser (1990), however, warns of the need to be aware of possible sources of domination and exclusion *within* deliberative exchanges that shape how learning occurs. For instance, even with deliberative rules and equality of opportunity in place “men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men also tend to speak more than women, taking more turns and longer turns; and women’s interventions are often more ignored or not responded to than men’s” (1990: 64). Due to these power differentials between participants, and the persistence of hierarchy and forms of social capital, learning can take on exclusionary forms. Moreover, as Young (1996: 124) notes, “dominant groups...often fail entirely to notice this devaluation [and exclusion], while the less privileged often feel put down or frustrated either losing confidence in themselves or becoming angry.”

Young's observation highlights the importance of evaluating communicative exchanges morally. Because conversational time, or the amount of talking that can be done in a given situation is finite, Ayim (1997) asserts that it can be necessary to establish agreed upon rules in order to ensure a fair apportioning of the time available, including in educational contexts such as classrooms. Ayim's argument draws attention not only to the importance of using moral criteria to evaluate *what* is said – or the content, but also to assess the social dynamics of talk, or *how* it is said. Ayim's criteria for evaluating ordinary conversational exchanges builds on the Habermasian approach which she uses to develop the criterion of 'democratic language' which is "predisposed to include and value equally other participants in the conversation... [and] is at heart anti-hierarchical... [It] will strive, so far as possible, to see that everyone has a turn, and that no one is excluded from the conversation" (Ayim, 1997: 99).

Thirdly, at a structural level, whilst Habermas's approach to collective deliberation is informed by a general commitment to equality and avoidance of exclusivity (what we call here, implicit inclusion), other deliberative theorists have tried to be more explicit in their approach to inclusion. Dryzek (1987), for instance, emphasizes the need to focus on the rules of 'discursive design' which shape the social institution itself. Other scholars have emphasized the need to "include mechanisms to actively encourage or *solicit* previously excluded constituencies" (Knight & Johnson, 1994: 289 our emphasis). Feminist deliberative theorists like Young (1999) and Ayim (1997) highlight in particular the need for a more explicit approach to inclusion and its relative absence in Habermas's work. Specifically, by focusing on unity and driving towards consensus, the importance of 'difference' as a resource in deliberation (and by extension learning), tends to be lost. The need to actively create and maintain spaces where different voices can be heard can be forgotten by those inspired by Habermas's consensus-driven approach. Young's critique suggests that implicit inclusion is

not enough; instead explicit inclusion should be a guiding principle from the outset that attempts to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups and individuals are listened to and accorded equivalent status.

Similarly, there are multiple challenges at play when seeking to incorporate inclusion within management education. *Doing* inclusion is associated with numerous paradoxes, for instance, inclusive practices can be experienced as excluding because they demand increased participation (Ferdman, 2017). Inclusion can also unintentionally lead to barriers, including exclusionary dynamics that range from communication apprehension to self-segregation that hinders increased involvement, particularly of the marginalized (Bernstein, Bulger, Salipante, & Weisinger, 2020). There is also a tendency, like in Habermasian approaches, to focus on diversity/equality in the expectation that inclusion will follow, rather than treating the two concepts as analytically and practically distinct (Oswick & Noon, 2014; Roberson, 2006). Without an explicit focus on inclusion, we suggest it is likely that the silencing, devaluing and domination of marginalized groups in collective educational settings will continue. To explore this further we now turn to conferences as a site of professional and management learning where issues of inclusivity and exclusivity are regularly experienced and struggled with in multiple ways.

### **Conferences as a Site of Inclusion and Exclusion**

Conferences are important sites of professional education and learning, knowledge acquisition and exchange. In addition to providing opportunities for formal knowledge transmission, where managers learn about recent developments in their field (Vanneste, 2008), update skills or maintain professional certification (Segar, 2010), conferences are important locales for informal learning through which participants, particularly managers, become socialized into professional cultures (Bell & King, 2010), build networks (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Schwartzmann, 1989), and seek to enhance their professional status (Segar,



2010). These inter-corporeal spaces through which professional identities are constructed (Bell & King, 2010), and professional fields are developed (Lampel & Meyer, 2008) provide important sites of management learning and education.

Traditional conferences tend to be organized hierarchically and this can lead to exclusion (Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010). Following Segar, we define the “traditional conference” as “events built around pre-planned sessions where invited experts present to audiences of attendees” whose main purpose is to impart “knowledge from those who hopefully have it to those who supposedly haven’t” (2010: 4). Exemplified by the keynote speaker, the traditional conference places “people in rows (classroom or theatre-style), where they all face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen” (Owen, 2008: 5). As Gross and Zilber recently argue “power is used not only through words, but also through space and embodiment, all working to turn self-serving constructions of the field into a taken-for-granted reality” (2020: 1370). This structure engenders patterns of interaction that privilege certain groups, particularly speakers, and exclude others who have lesser status (Schwartzmann, 1989), reinforcing existing hierarchies (Poade & Young, 2022). Because of this, conferences encourage a transmission mode of education, of which Giroux (2011) and many other educational theorists have been critical.

Traditional conference formats regularly lead to experiences of exclusion and power imbalances. This is neatly captured by Ford and Harding’s ethnographic description of a practitioner conference, where they listened to a keynote speaker who made them feel “[s]mall, inadequate, isolated, in need of education” (2008: 241), like “naughty adolescents”, “reduced to being one of the mass ... [where] those in power were the speakers who were, we had been told, all expert in their fields” (2010: 510). Because they were “governed by the norms of attending conferences... [they sat] passively in [their] seats, shouted at and unable to respond” (2010: 510). This confirms Henderson’s point that the rules which govern

conferences are “difficult to break... because they are spatially enforced through, for example, the pedagogical layout of conference rooms” which reproduces power hierarchies, “followed by the equally convention riddled ‘informality’ of social time at events such as lunchtime and drinks receptions” (2019: 8).

As the above suggests, conferences are contrary to the Habermasian ideal of deliberative exchange and CME’s critique of imbalanced power dynamics within the learning process (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018). Indeed, for over two decades research has drawn attention to the exclusionary nature of traditional conferences (Bell & King, 2010; Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010; Parker & Weik, 2014; Poade & Young, 2022; Settles & O’Connor, 2014; Spicer, 2005). Studies have highlighted patterns of overt exclusion, such as the lack of representation of women or people of color, exemplified by hashtags #manels and #wanels<sup>i</sup> (Henderson & Burford, 2020). They also identify more subtle patterns of exclusion, such as the dominance of male voices in question and answer sessions (Hinsley, Sutherland, & Johnston, 2017). This research demonstrates that conferences are shaped by power differentials (Gross & Zilber, 2020) which (re)produce inequalities related to race, gender, age, class and status (Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010; Henderson, 2019) and determine patterns of exclusion which shape interaction and learning (Bell & King, 2010). Such research points to the micro-politics of power as embodied and embedded in everyday interactions and spaces in ways which shape the process of knowledge production (see Henderson, 2019 for a review).

Knights, for instance, drawing on his experiences of academic conferences, describes how protagonists exhibit “gladiatorial character” in a masculine atmosphere, displaying a “cockfighting mentality” (2006: 712). Similarly, Ford and Harding show how the “gendered subject positions constructed for women...were those of inferior, subordinated subjects working in a disempowering, patriarchal and paternalistic culture...[which] infantilized them

and rendered them fearful” (2010: 504). Literature beyond organizational studies supports these assertions, showing that women and other marginalized groups are regularly overlooked for leading roles at conferences (Biggs, Hawley, & Biernat, 2018; Mair & Frew, 2016).

Walters (2018: 231) suggests:

The behaviour that is being modelled to the next generation of scholars normalizes a lack of diversity and inclusion and as a result, women and minority group delegates are not provided with role models that they can relate to and emulate. Rather the behaviour suggests that white males are the expert. This devalues the perspectives and knowledge that women and minority groups bring to their fields and excludes their voices from the conversation.

A parallel concern is how these hierarchical structures shape patterns of interaction that limit collective learning. Critics contend that this structure limits the central purpose of the *conference*, to confer, converse, gather and consult together for collective learning (Schwartzmann, 1989; Vanneste, 2008). For instance, reflecting on their experiences of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conference, Wiessner and colleagues state that “Attendees typically left [the conference] with their own learning, but did not benefit from others’ learning, nor gain understanding of overall learning occurring that could benefit their scholarship or practice” (2008: 368). In short, the structures of traditional conferences shape patterns of interaction which propagate a transmission mode of learning (Giroux, 2011) and perpetuate power imbalances (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018), thereby excluding marginalized voices from the process of knowledge production (Henderson, 2019).

To address these problems of exclusion, efforts have been made to situate inclusion as an explicit aim of conferencing. One approach to this involves increased representation, in order to challenge overt exclusion of marginalized groups. For example, Mair and Frew (2016: 2168) state: “conference organizers should be aware of issues of equity and diversity

when selecting session chairs, panel members and plenary and keynote speakers and, wherever possible, offer these opportunities to junior colleagues, female delegates and those from other underrepresented groups”. This approach seeks to maintain traditional conference structures, whilst seeking to be more representative and inclusive<sup>ii</sup>. A more holistic approach, however, involves rethinking the organizing principles around which conferences are designed. Ravn and Elsborg (2011) argue that conferences should be transformed to enable greater peer-to-peer interaction and more inclusive and vibrant deliberative exchange.

Whilst critical studies have illuminated how conferences can be excluding in a manner which reflects the feminist critique of deliberative exchange, there has thus far been little research exploring practical alternatives. This paper addresses this issue by exploring whether the unconference, with its commitment to free and equal participation, can incorporate radical efforts to promote deliberative exchange in a way that leads to more inclusive practices in management education. It is to this question that we now turn.

## **METHODS**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between 2015-16 and comprised 3 phases. In phase one we identified potential unconfereces, guided by promotional literatures, including on social media, internet searches for unconfereces and snowball sampling where research participants provided us with suggestions of further unconfereces to explore. We eventually identified four critical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that were most likely to generate opportunities to learn inductively about unconferecing (Stake, 1995) whilst also ensuring a degree of variation, including in the occupation of participants and employment sectors covered.

Our fieldwork was conducted at three unconfereces and one unconferece style meet-up. The first, SpaceCamp,<sup>iii</sup> is a two-day event held in a major European city which involved 45 participants (freelance project managers, consultants, trainers, and a few students), focusing on the challenges that project managers have and enabling them to learn

from each other. The second, FreeCamp, is an annual one-day event, then in its ninth year with approximately 200 participants, mainly UK public sector technology-related professionals and technology-related consultants. This unconference focused on the future of public sector tech and open data. The third, ConnectCamp, is an annual one-day event held in central England, then in its fourth year with approximately 160 participants, mostly communication professionals, predominantly in the public sector, focusing on issues around communication. The fourth, Ketillclub is an unconference style regular “meet up” held in London.

Three of the four unconferences focused on specialist professional occupations, project management, communications professional or local government professionals. The topics and knowledge generated within these three unconferences focused on issues pertinent to attendees’ professional practice, whereas Ketillclub was open to anyone and dealt with more wide ranging, less professionally focused topics. Three of the four case studies were regular unconferences held annually, whereas the fourth, SpaceCamp was an inaugural event. They also varied in length, Ketillclub was the shortest at 90 minutes, held weekly; SpaceCamp and FreeCamp lasted one full day and SpaceCamp ran over two days. SpaceCamp attracted participants from across Europe, whereas the other unconferences attendees travelled from locations in the UK. Across the four cases the age range of the attendees was broad, but the gender balance was skewed slightly towards male participants. Most attendees were mid-level professionals, but there was a range of junior and senior professional attendees as well.

Our exploratory research design enabled empirical exploration of a practice that is limitedly understood and enabled us to address our research question. Our research methods began with participant observation — we took detailed fieldnotes based on attending and taking part in each unconference. Fieldnotes focused on aspects including the venue, layout,

atmosphere, dress code, on the format and structure, how unconferencing was explained, how participants responded and the content of sessions. Our observations were also attentive to the responses of, and subtle interactions between, participants and the ideas this generated for us during the fieldwork. We also analyzed publicly available blog posts, Twitter feeds, websites and Facebook posts relevant to each unconference, prior to, during and in the weeks immediately following each event.

Second, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with participants and organizers of unconferences attended and other key informants recommended to us by initial interviewees because of their expertise in organizing unconferences. The interviews were conducted online, either prior to or following the unconference. This provided a convenient way of accessing participants that they were familiar and comfortable with (Hanna, 2012). Online interviewing also enabled a more international sample of participants located in the UK (n = 19), Germany (5), Spain (2), USA (1), Belgium (1), Cyprus (1). Interviews lasted approximately 50-60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Questions asked during interviews explored interviewees' roles and professional background, experiences of traditional conferences and their introduction into and motivation to attend unconferences, and an account of the unconferences they were involved in. For unconference organizers and key informants, discussion focused on their motivation to organize unconferences within their professional community. For these interviewees we also focused on the format, structure, and practices, such as pitching or how rules were used within the unconference, the intention behind them and opportunities and challenges created. For unconference participants, questions focused on their experiences of attending the unconference, paying particular attention to how they differed from other professional conferences attended, and how different types of conferences shaped their learning, networks, and participation. Topics that interviewees spoke about included experiences of pitching,

participating in discussions, and the social and emotional experience of being part of an unconference. For all interviewees we also explored the nature and type of learning experienced at both traditional conferences and unconferences and, as the interviews progressed, we became more attentive to issues of inclusion and exclusion within unconferences.

Third, in keeping with our interest in inclusive methods of organizing we organized a one-day unconference, ‘A Conference on Unconferencing’ in early 2017. This event was attended by 25 participants, predominantly meeting organizers and industry professionals. We used this event to share our initial research findings with participants using unconference methods, including Lightning Talks – rapid presentations that give more time for discussion (Boule, 2011). This provided a basis for feedback and discussion and enabled us to develop further insights into the practice of unconferencing and provided us with considerations for future research.

We analyzed the data by reading transcripts and fieldnotes closely several times before thematically coding the data in NVivo. Analysis was iterative, first-order coding of recurrent terms used by interviewees (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), focusing on specific claims and practices within an unconference and comparing them to traditional conferences. These codes were developed into 27 themes with labels and descriptors and formed the basis for the analysis including “descriptions and critiques of conferences and unconferences”, “inclusion”, “hierarchy and horizontal group learning” and “leadership and guardian of the commons” (see Table 1).

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This was followed by a further stage of second-order coding of a more abstract, conceptual nature related to our theoretical framing and research question. We explicitly focused on comparing emerging themes against our theoretical framing based on feminist

critiques of the Habermasian perspective, using this to generate the three overarching themes presented below.

### **Contextualizing Unconferencing**

The unconference is described as a horizontal peer-to-peer learning format designed to offer participatory and creative learning experiences (Owen, 2008; Wolf et al., 2011). Whilst there has been a recent rise in the popularity of unconferencing, the format has a long history; Alexander von Humboldt is credited with inventing a precursor to the unconference in 1928 (Wulf, 2015) and Richard Ohmann is widely regarded as the first person to use the term in the 1970s (Ohmann, 1974). Today, unconferences draw on variations of Harrison Owen's (2008) Open Space Technology (OST), whereby meetings are approached as self-organized spaces shaped by a facilitator whose role is to 'hold space' and manage time and guided by a few principles which Owen calls 'rules'. These so-called rules, or what Harrison Owen calls 'laws', are not fixed instructions but "simple statements of the way things work ... they are descriptive and not prescriptive" (Owen, 2008: 91). These rules provide a way of surfacing expectations and principles for the event. The central rules of the unconference are: i) Whoever comes are the right people; ii) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have; iii) Whenever it starts is the right time; and iv) When it's over, it's over (2008: 95).

This format has spawned a variety of related meeting formats including BarCamps, FooCamps and TeachMeet. Despite their increasing popularity, unconferencing has received relatively little academic attention, and most literature is written from a practitioner perspective (Budd et al., 2015; LaPointe, Mehrotra, & O'Brien, 2011; Sorochan, 2012; Wolf et al., 2011; Wolf & Troxler, 2015). These texts concentrate on outlining key principles and emphasizing the value of unconferencing for the co-creation and co-construction of knowledge (Van Woezik, Reuzel, Koksma, & Serpa, 2019), where attendees become active learners (Budd et al., 2015) in ways that support individual and social learning (Wolf &



Troxler, 2008), thereby transforming patterns of communication and the organizing and creation of knowledge (Wolf & Troxler, 2015). Thus, unconferencing is presented as an attempt at *doing* inclusion in a way that endeavors to resolve the exclusionary power dynamics associated with traditional conferencing. However, to our knowledge there have been no attempts so far to critically explore the extent to which this ideal is achieved in practice.

In the following section we summarize how unconferences are organized, drawing on the nascent literature and our case studies, particularly SpaceCamp, FreeCamp and CommsCamp, as these three unconferences most closely adopted this structure. Whilst there are some variations in structure and format, unconferences generally share the following common features:

***Recruitment:*** Unconference participation begins several weeks prior to the event, through promotion and networking. All three unconferences we observed and participated in were advertised to, and drew participants from, professional communities and networks, often by using social media including Facebook, Twitter and Blogs. These communications were used to establish expectations, communicate the purpose of the event and build connections between participants. As Mary (ConnectCamp) states:

there was quite a lot of that bonding stuff going on which you wouldn't have in a normal conference where you just turn up cold normally.

Interviewees expressed a variety of reasons for participating in unconferences, including frustration with conventional conferences, interest in the organizing group, lower prices, desire to connect with others, build networks and feel part of a community. Dan (SpaceCamp) said:

it's just really a community thing for me, I like to feel like I belong to a community and I do, I just wanted to confirm that there's a community actually out there.

***Pitching and session planning:*** How sessions are arranged is one of the most distinct features of unconferences. In contrast to conventional conferences, where content is pre-planned, often weeks and sometimes years in advance, the content emerges on the day (Boule, 2011). This is achieved by ‘pitching’. Pitching is where anyone who wants to propose a session makes a brief (approximately 30 second) case for the issue they want to discuss to the whole group. It is recommended that pitching is unplanned and spontaneous to ensure that sessions are user generated, thereby increasing participation and lessening the power and influence of meeting organizers to shape agendas (Boule, 2011; Owen, 2008).

Pitched sessions were arranged into a timetable by the unconference planners, referred to as ‘campmakers’. At FreeCamp, participants were asked: ‘*who’s interested in that session?*’ prompting a show of hands and used to calculate the size of the room the session took place in (if no hands are raised, the session does not take place). The whole process is typically concluded within an hour. Whilst the unconference is user-generated, campmakers have authority to arrange the timings, location and viability of a session. If pitched sessions seem too similar, or there are more sessions than available slots, campmakers will combine, drop or rearrange sessions. At SpaceCamp sessions were written up on Post-it Notes, meaning that sessions could be rearranged, sometimes by participants themselves, throughout the unconference, as part of an ongoing process of re-negotiation.

***The sessions:*** Sessions are facilitated by those who have pitched them and generally last approximately 45-60 minutes (time is pre-set by campmakers). A variety of presentation styles are used, from formal PowerPoint presentations (including some akin to sales pitches), piloting of training techniques facilitators use in their own organizations, through to informal discussions where the facilitator described a project that they had just worked on and the personal and organizational challenges it generated. The majority (although not all), sessions actively encourage participation, discussion and debate.

***Collective capturing of knowledge:*** A final key feature of unconferences is that attendees, particularly those who pitch sessions, are asked to make the knowledge produced from the session open and accessible to others, so they can learn from it, by writing up a summary of their sessions as a blog or wiki, to increase participation and knowledge sharing.

These aspects of the unconference are intended to make the learning environment more inclusive. We now turn to our findings in where we explore the extent of inclusivity enabled by conferencing, at individual, group and structural levels.

### **“The Beauty of an Unconference”: From Exclusion Towards Inclusion of Individual Voices**

Many of our interviewees stated their reason for attending unconferences arose from negative experiences of attending traditional conferences, as isolating and individualizing (see Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010; Schwartzmann, 1989; Segar, 2010 for similar critiques of conferences). They described feeling like an ‘outsider’, trying break into the ‘old boys club’ (Hans, SpaceCamp), not speaking the same language, feeling nervous (Adam, SpaceCamp) or uncomfortable (Conrad, SpaceCamp) in making connections. Dan (SpaceCamp) stated that whilst attendees are all physically in the same room, the structure means “there’s no motivation for you to kind of reach outside your immediate circle” resulting in limited interaction. As a consequence:

if you’re for example new or not that involved in certain communities... it’s quite heavy to, you know, get started talking to people... people don’t let you in that quickly unless you have something special to offer. (Eric, SpaceCamp)

In contrast, many interviewees described how unconferences provide opportunities for more inclusive communication between equals. Several participants described how they were able to quickly get to know others and build connections. They saw these interactions as ‘non-hierarchical’, ‘more equal’ (Mary, ConnectCamp), with ‘less separation between people’

(Paul, ConnectCamp) who were on 'a level playing field' (Tricia, ConnectCamp). A number of participants explained that unconferences enabled interaction with a broader range of people than in traditional conferences, by breaking down barriers and creating inclusive spaces:

You can just have a conversation with whoever about whatever. And that's one of the kind of, I suppose the guiding principles of an unconference is that, you know, it's not a case of oh, there's a chief executive over there so sort of give special reverential treatment and create a top table for him to sit at to make him feel important. It's a case of everyone is just on a fairly democratic level playing field. (Andy, ConnectCamp)

The structure of the unconference, particularly the interaction within sessions and cultural expectations of participation and inclusivity, can lead to increased levels of interaction. As Dan (SpaceCamp) states when reflecting on why the unconference led him to many more professional connections:

It was the personal nature, it was the environment, of the unconference which was you're kind of forced to get to know each other. I mean there's a small number of you for a start, you're in the same space so there's not like ten rooms where people separate and go into.

We experienced this in our own participation at the unconference. For instance, Daniel's fieldnotes describe his feelings of being 'nervous' and having 'stilted' conversations at the beginning of attending SpaceCamp. However, despite not being a project manager or knowing anyone prior to the event, he quickly felt at ease and able to participate. Not only was this to do with the small size of the event, but as he reflected afterwards, the highly interactive nature of the sessions meant he quickly built links with people. However, across the case studies we identified numerous examples of exclusion and unequal power relations. Through participant observation we found that, on occasions, some speakers (often men in

senior positions) “talk with authority in a highly assertive manner” (ConnectCamp fieldnotes), contributing towards a continued sense of hierarchy and exclusion. In another situation, we noticed that the speakers’ “style is very direct, some may go as far as saying this is aggressive... its quite evident that the power relations between the speaker and the audience are there, he certainly has a hierarchical position which is exemplified or maybe even exacerbated by his personality which is quite a dominant” (SpaceCamp fieldnotes). This suggests persistence of hidden forms of exclusion that privilege certain forms of speech and behavior (Young, 1996). For instance, Joy, a student states, “you still know who was in charge, they still made quite a big deal about certain people, so like I said, the first session I went to was obviously by someone important because every time he went anywhere near them they’d make a big deal about, you know, how he made an impression on a room, you know” (Joy, ConnectCamp). Other interviewees observed that some dominant speakers were not really in the ‘unconference spirit’. However, if what they said was interesting enough, such approaches were tolerated.

Yeah, well I think [senior male speaker] very much held the room and decided he was going to tell people about his framework and so it wasn’t quite as participatory as some of the others. ... He was quite, you know, his style was quite so “I’m here, I’m going to tell you about this and you’re going to listen”. (Mary, ConnectCamp)

Thus, despite the intention of inclusivity to a wider variety of voices, the exclusionary features of the traditional conference format sporadically reappeared. Participants were, after all, still operating in a wider patriarchal system which perpetuates disempowerment, especially of women and other minoritized groups (Ford & Harding, 2010), that the unconference could not escape from.

Joy described her experience of attending ConnectCamp as ‘chaotic’ and disorientating. She explained that ‘leaders’ (session facilitators)

...were so casual and they were swearing and they were making jokes, and it was like I'd walked into someone else's party or something... It felt like everyone else knew what was going on, everyone else were really good friends and that it was just friends rather than a professional thing that I'd just been asked to do to progress my career... you feel like you're looking in on someone else's conversation. It can be quite off-putting to actually get involved until you realize that's the whole point. (Joy, ConnectCamp)

This kind of experience speaks to a central paradox of encouraging greater inclusion. Extending the range of communicative approaches (towards the informal) can engender a sense of camaraderie and togetherness, and increase inclusion. However, anybody finding themselves outside of the camaraderie (the "inside" group) are likely to find themselves feeling even more excluded (Ferdman, 2017). These hidden exclusions were acknowledged by experienced participants:

It can be a bit cliquy and I think that's really hard to avoid, so [the unconference] is a nice opportunity for people to catch up with friends who they haven't seen for a while. And it can feel a bit like that and I'm perfectly guilty of that myself. And I think that makes it quite hard for new people joining to necessarily kind of get in. (Sarah, FreeCamp)

Joy's reflection on her experience "looking in on someone else's conversation" brings to mind the feminist critique of Habermasian framework of rational exchange, which suggests inclusive learning is undermined by privileging masculine and predominantly high-status voices and excluding alternative modes of communication. There is an assumption, according to Young (1996: 123) that "when we eliminate the influence of economic and political power, people's ways of speaking and understanding will be the same; but this will only be true if we eliminate their cultural differences and different social positions." As Joy's quote highlights,

within unconferecing (as in other deliberative fora), invisible forms of power rooted in social and cultural difference continue to exclude individuals and groups with lesser social status in a variety of ways.

Many unconferece organizers were cognizant of these hidden forms of exclusion and had developed explicit inclusive practices in order to try to address them. One example of this involved challenging dominant individuals by ‘calling out’ exclusionary behavior using a series of rules. These ‘rules’, in line with Harrison Owen, were not ‘rules’ as we would normally understand them as instructions to be followed; rather they were descriptions of principles intended to make the event run more smoothly (for a discussion see Owen, 2008: 95). One rule of FreeCamp, distributed to participants at the start of the day was: ‘*Been talking for a while? Shut up!*’ (fieldnotes). Organizers were explicit about these rules which were stated at the beginning of the unconferece to participants as a way of trying to overcome power imbalances.

At the beginning I try to explain that if you come armed with a massive slide deck and you expect to tell people everything on the slide deck and then do a Q&A, you’re in the wrong place. (Jason, FreeCamp organizer)

Other explicitly inclusive practices included moderators actively intervening to challenge dominant speakers. At FreeCamp, one session leader was particularly didactic, using a lengthy PowerPoint presentation and speaking continuously for 15 minutes.

The moderator introduces himself and says, ‘In my role as moderator, we are now 15 minutes into the 45-minute session and nobody else has spoken yet’. The speaker appears defensive, he stops his presentation and says, ‘I’ve been instructed to engage you all in conversation’. There is a pause. Someone says, ‘I have a question...’ The speaker sits on the desk and answers the question at some length. No one uses the rule of two feet. Some further questions follow, audiences raise their hands to indicate

they wish to speak, the speaker indicates when he is ready to hear them by saying ‘next question’, and then answers the question by using phrases like ‘I can tell you’.

Questions are not necessarily answered in the order in which hands are raised.

(FreeCamp, fieldnotes)

Another practice intended to encourage inclusion is the ‘law of two feet’. Again, this ‘law’ is not a set instruction but a principle for how things should work. The law of two feet Owen states is that “*in any situation where you are neither learning not contributing*” (2008: 95 italics in original) participants are actively encouraged to leave the room and find somewhere else (i.e. another session) where they can contribute. For unconference attendees, the law of two feet was seen as a mean of community self-regulation by changing the dynamics of the session.

I have seen a session where somebody, some consultant did walk in there and started firing up a PowerPoint, basically doing a hard sell, and everybody walked out. (Otto, FreeCamp)

The desire for inclusion was also explicitly expressed by meeting organizers. At the beginning of SpaceCamp organizers stressed that ‘nobody should be lonely’ (SpaceCamp fieldnotes). Jason, an unconference organizer, expressed the view that challenging norms around privileged voices was the most important rule of the day.

So, whilst unconferencing is based on a concerted effort to move away from traditional, exclusively rational, hierarchical forms of communication that privilege certain individuals, democratic ideals were not always successfully enacted and sometimes communication was pulled back towards established norms and power relations that operate within traditional spheres of deliberative exchange and create significant barriers to inclusivity.



## **“It’s Kind of Super-participatory”: From Hierarchical to Horizontal Group Learning**

In line with a feminist critique of deliberative spaces (Ayim, 1997; Fraser, 1990; Young, 1996), some unconference attendees described their learning experiences at conventional conferences as hierarchical and gendered:

[It’s] a lot of middle-aged men, standing up talking and asking rhetorical questions for half an hour and showing off their own knowledge. (Rose, ConnectCamp)

In addition to experiencing learning at conventional conferences as passive, participants are positioned as recipients of knowledge (Segar, 2010). Unconferences, in contrast, seek to transform group learning in a manner that is more inclusive, by encouraging interaction, peer-to-peer learning, and horizontal communication. As any attendee can pitch and run sessions, in the form of small, workshop-style meetings where everyone is encouraged to share insights and learning. The structures and ‘rules’ of unconferences, in line with a Habermasian perspective, appear to provide the opportunity for all to speak and participate. Pitching is central to this agenda setting:

It’s an agenda which is set by the people who are there, and you can run a session, or you can just go along to other people’s sessions. But there is no speaker list and the expectation is that you, you know, you get out of the conference what you put in really, so you have to participate to sort of experience it. (Alex, ConnectCamp)

Unconferences thereby not only challenge existing hierarchies (Zilber, 2011), but by broadening who sets the agenda (Gross & Zilber, 2020), they diversify what counts as knowledge and who can speak, creating opportunities for new professional connections, enabling innovation and learning through diverse perspectives (Fiol, 1994) in ways that chime with the emancipatory goals of critical management education, by transforming the transmission mode of learning (Giroux, 2011) and addressing power imbalances within the

learning environment (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018). Collective agenda setting was a core feature of the FreeCamp unconference:

I think the idea that it's user generated, that to me [is] the spontaneousness of it, people turning up on the morning and deciding on the morning what they will talk about ... So it's a kind of democratic feel to it, I guess and it's kind of super participatory... It's community organized and because anybody can talk about anything, for me it has the feeling that this is very much of the community. (Ed, FreeCamp)

Yet in practice, the unconferences we studied were not as spontaneous or horizontal as proponents like (i.e. Boule, 2011) suggest. Some participants noted there was a tendency for hierarchy to persist, with 'superstars' sessions used to draw bigger crowds (Beth, ConnectCamp) and exert influence, as "a lot of people tend to defer to [their] judgement" (Jason, FreeCamp). Rather than being completely spontaneous, some unconference sessions were preplanned, with many participants pre-pitching sessions on social media (Fieldnotes). One interviewee observed that, whilst anyone can pitch on the day, in their experience "half [of the sessions] are pre-assigned based on the voting beforehand" (Paul, CommsCamp). Thus, whilst overt hierarchies are rejected, hidden hierarchies remain, with existing networks shaping attendance and preserving transmission learning that is experienced as exclusionary.

One possible reason for the persistence of these hierarchies relates to the anxiety of unconference organizers about the number of people who are willing to pitch. This was observed at SpaceCamp, as recorded in fieldnotes:

There is silence, Mark – unconference organizer, with a slight pleading in his voice, invites certain named people he thinks might want to present.

This was confirmed by organizers who described their anxiety (before the event), of not filling enough spaces: "Of course I was worried, Ok, maybe we can't fill five parallels [sessions]" (Susi, Informant); to counteract this some unconference organizers deliberately sought out "a

few heavyweights” (Eric, SpaceCamp), who were likely to attract an audience. As this suggests, despite a commitment to create inclusive opportunities to speak, informal networks are used to elicit the participation of existing elites. Although, in principle, anyone can pitch – equality of opportunity to participate in a Habermasian terms – a number of regular unconferees attendees also noted gender and status differences, where women or early career individuals were less likely to pitch (Young, 1996). As a blog post put it: “On the train home I was kicking myself as I really wanted to pitch a session” (FreeCamp blog). Having the confidence to pitch in front of an audience of sometimes in excess of 200 people can be nerve-racking. For instance, Jessica (SpaceCamp), describes her anxiety preventing her from pitching but afterwards feeling regretful and guilty that she did not pitch, as not participating was not in the spirit of the unconference:

I’m feeling a little bit bad about it because I think, yeah, I should have offered something so yeah, next time I really have to give something back.

This suggests communication apprehension – that is, the lack of confidence and willingness to engage in deliberative exchange – which so often undermines inclusion is still very much present (Bernstein et al., 2020). Some unconference organizers demonstrated awareness of this, noting that it is not enough to simply include those with less social capital in the unconference, instead active interventions are required to enable explicitly inclusive practices. These organizers sought to overcome exclusion by seeking to encourage a wider range of voices, by setting expectations designed to change the power dynamics. One approach involved making participation explicit, as one website put it “there is no room for passengers at an unconference”. Organizers stress it is everyone’s responsibility to participate (fieldnotes) because the success of the unconference relies on collective endeavor and active invitation of those who have not spoken to pitch. However, these expectations were

experienced by some as an unwanted pressure, particularly less experienced participants. Joy, who was new to unconferences described her confusion and fear of pitching:

I didn't really know what they meant by a pitch; I didn't know what I needed to do... like if it needed to be my expertise, how bespoke it needed to be, you know, all of those kind of things... it was a little bit horrifying, partially because we were told [by my line manager] to do a pitch... I just suddenly had to stand with a group of people, whereas everyone else was going one up, making a pitch.

We see here a paradox of inclusion (Ferdman, 2017), whereby attempts to increase participation can be experienced as oppressive – a phenomenon we see replicated elsewhere, such as new social movements (see Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016 for a discussion).

A second approach involved actively challenging existing hierarchies and power relations by preventing more powerful groups from pitching:

We forbade any managers of a particular seniority and above to pitch the sessions in the beginning. We said like, “now we need the bulk of the workforce to have their say”.

(Esko, GovCamp)

A third approach involves trying to break down social barriers that prevent inclusion. As Sarah, GovCamp states “I know a few years ago we used to in the morning always go round the room and introduce yourself, so that gave new people some chance of sort of being able to identify who they wanted to talk to in the day.” Through this unconference organizers sought to change patterns of interaction that shape conference participation, and to seek to break down barriers that prevent inclusion. A fourth approach involved collective examination by working through the barriers that prevent people from pitching. Beth recounted a situation where an unconference organizer asked people to pitch who had not done so previously. Based on this experience she mobilized a small group to collectively support each other to pitch at the next unconference. The result she said was her “confidence

grew then I was like... ‘your ideas are valid and pitch them’” (Beth, ConnectCamp). This approach follows a more social model of inclusion.

As these examples show, attempts to remove barriers require attentiveness to hidden hierarchies and exclusions and seeking to overcome them through explicit inclusive practices. However, whilst beneficial for some participants, these practices were not universally adopted. Instead, it was up to participants to initiate them (as with Beth’s intervention), and when enacted by conference leaders in formal group rules and expectations, they were not necessarily welcomed by all participants. This points towards ongoing and persistent challenges in enabling inclusion at the group level even within the unconference (Ferdman, 2017).

### **“Guardianship of the Commons”: Towards a Spirit of Engagement and Inclusion**

Many interviewees described what they called, the ‘spirit of the unconference’, a requirement not only for attendees to participate, but for everyone to help to build a culture which encourages openness and learning through collective exchange. Not only was there an expectation upon attendees to engage in activities, such as pitching a session or participating in discussions, they were also expected to engage in mundane activities, like rearranging chairs (SpaceCamp, fieldnotes) or welcoming new people, aimed at creating a culture of inclusion. The spirit of the unconference thereby seeks to transform patterns of interaction from a hierarchical transmission mode of learning (Giroux, 2011) towards collective and participatory learning. As Jessica explained:

it’s the people that make the SpaceCamp. It’s not something you go to and you just, you can just only expect something, but you also have to give something and it’s fun to do, it’s fun to share. ... And if something goes wrong, like you can just make help to make it right or make it better or yeah. So that’s the spirit. (Jessica, SpaceCamp)

This spirit of the unconference aims to be inclusive, to enable all to participate:

So, the idea of devoting space, one of those things is to turn, level the playing field and to give everyone a voice. And it really felt like it did that, like it was a moment of 200 people here, from a student who's only been making work for ten weeks to a funder who's been funding work for 20 years, in the same room... it was just so empowering. It was absolutely amazing that we could facilitate... so many people and their opinions. (Tricia, ConnectCamp)

Unconference participants and organizers see the collective, embodied (Bell & King, 2010) experience of participation as a vital part of the learning experience. The focus is not only on content, but also shaping the patterns of interaction towards inclusivity through peer-to-peer and horizontal learning and communication (Boule, 2011). Yet, despite the ambition of inclusive participation, class, gender and organizational seniority continued to shape participation (Mair & Frew, 2016). There was, in some instances, a misguided Habermasian assumption that inclusion would necessarily follow from commitment to equality of participation (Roberson, 2006). In these instances unconference organizers found themselves struggling to live up to the spirit of inclusion, unable to provide safe spaces for the emergence of different, less privileged voices.

Yet unconferecing does not mean the absence of hierarchy, rather it involves a particular form of relational hierarchy that facilitates the functioning of the group (Cox & Hassard, 2018). Central to this is the role of meeting organizers. Instead of leaving decisions to the group as the peer-to-peer format might suggest, meeting organizers were active in shaping the event. This was described by one of the meeting organizers:

It's the guardianship of the commons really to say yes, this is an open space but that doesn't mean you can do whatever you want and trample all over the experience that other people are having. (William, Informant)

This notion of the guardian of the commons ties in well with how Harrison Owen's description of the unconference facilitator's role which is 'to open and hold the space' (Owen, 2008) in order to make the environment conducive to learning. As Otto a FreeCamp participant put it, the facilitators role is to:

Establish... a common understanding of why we're here and [acknowledge] that it's maybe unusual and [to] make people feel comfortable, and then to coax people... They all have a story inside of them that they want to put on the agenda; only a few will actually muster up the courage to do so.

Describing William, the founder of Ketill, Linda says "he's somebody who's good at holding a space... a space enables that space to work". Linda describes an occasion when Ketill was held in an office and everyone was seated around a table talking. When William arrived:

He laughed at us... because we were sitting around the Director's table and that is not Ketill behavior. You know, within a couple of minutes of [William] moving into the room we had shifted the furniture around because actually it was a table that could be, you know, redone. So, within a couple of moments ... it had become fluid, right. And it's just those kinds of little details that alter the way the space works.

The role of the facilitator involves creating an environment that encourages interaction and peer-learning, enabling inclusion through a relational, collaborative form of hierarchy through managing the boundaries of the group, expectations and meaning (Sutherland, Land, & Böhm, 2014). This includes seeking to attract a suitable audience. Whilst the message of unconferecing is 'whoever comes, comes' (Owen, 2008), some organizers explicitly sought to influence the composition of the group. As Otto, who had organized of a number of unconfereces describes:

we forbade any managers of a particular seniority and above to pitch the sessions in the beginning. ... And we had one where the chief executive in the afternoon, he said

on three different occasions this morning I've heard that I'm a scary person and unapproachable and as a result of that people haven't told me things I should have known, so I want to put a session forward where I'm just going to sit and you guys are going to tell me what it is about me that's scary and I'm going to work to fix that. And my goodness, was that an amazing session.

The role of unconference organizers as 'guardian of the commons' involves actively shaping patterns of interaction to increase inclusivity (Young, 1996). They did this by explicitly stating the 'rules' of the unconference, either in blog posts prior to the event, telling everyone the rules at the beginning of the unconference and in some cases, by displaying the rules on walls around the venue. Thus the 'spirit of the unconference' was actively curated by meeting organizers, as our fieldnotes highlight:

Conrad (the unconference organizer) states that the event is *everyone's responsibility* and that they don't want people to be lonely (SpaceCamp, Fieldnotes).

ConnectCamp facilitator stresses that everyone's responsibility of the success of the event, explaining humorously 'so if it goes wrong, we can blame you'.

(ConnectCamp, Fieldnotes)

Unconference organizers also intervened in sessions in order to challenge patterns of interaction that they perceived to be dominating or hierarchical:

A Spanish guy at the conference, gave a talk on something. It was not a participative talk but a frontal teaching, just one-way talk, and he did do advertising for his company. So at least I saw myself, feeling in myself and I actually went to him afterwards and said this was violating the spirit. So, there is this control and yeah, ... So, there is a certain self-controlling, self-policing activity going on, a little bit more soft and subtle than other conferences. (Eric, SpaceCamp)



The flow of the unconference is further shaped through the allocation of sessions. While all participants were free to pitch and suggest content, and to decide what to attend, unconference organizers controlled timings and merged sessions (particularly when there were more sessions proposed than slots allocated). This has a material dimension, for example physically moving Post-it notes around a board often in sight of participants (SpaceCamp, fieldnotes). The exertion of control by organizers was intended to ensure the event ran smoothly and included a variety of voices. But it also meant that curation of the event was in the hands of a few more powerful individuals those with less power in the event were at the mercy of the good will and organizational skills of those in charge (Gross & Zilber, 2020).

In summary, “guardianship of the commons” provides a way of encouraging inclusivity and enabling learning by developing a relational collaborative hierarchy within unconferences. However, this maintains a power imbalance between participants and organizers that leaves open the possibility, and actuality, of exclusion. The tendency to implicitly assume that inclusion would emerge from a commitment to the ideals of unconferencing (and the spirit of these events more generally) was potentially insufficient to engender explicit commitment to inclusion across the collective space.

### **DISCUSSION: TOWARDS EXPLICIT INCLUSION**

The motivation for this article was to explore what can be learnt from unconferences in order to rethink management education as a more inclusive endeavor. Our findings show that unconferences aspire to something akin to a Habermasian ideal speech situation, seeking to create interactions that are more inclusive by increasing the range of voices that can pitch, and, in doing so, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Most participants describe unconferences as empowering, fulfilling, and inclusive, and celebrate the greater freedom and equality they provide. They particularly noted how the ‘user-generated’ format allowed them

to set the agenda, helped to break down hierarchies, and enable collective learning. Thus, our findings suggest unconferences generate implicit inclusion. That is, they aim to create an environment of equality of voice and participation and assume that the outcome of this is an environment where people will no longer be excluded, in three core ways. First, unconferences move away from hierarchical interaction that privileges higher status groups and extend involvement to a wider array of individuals in a way which provides opportunities for peer-learning. Second, unconferences encourage equality of opportunity to speak at a group level so that anyone can pitch, shaping a more horizontal approach to knowledge creation and learning. They do this by creating rules and procedures that provide the principles through which individuals engage with each other to facilitate inclusive learning (Owen, 2008). Finally, unconferecing organization embodies a general spirit of inclusion in which organizers – albeit to differing extents – seek to uphold a commitment to guarding a common space for inclusive participation by creating a facilitated learning environment. Unconferences thereby offer the possibilities of more inclusive forms of management education that critical education theorists (Giroux, 2011; Perriton & Reynolds, 2018) call for, with the potential to enable the voices of minoritized and marginalized groups to be heard through peer and collective learning (Bell et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

Yet exclusionary practices persist. In line with a feminist critique of the Habermasian ideal speech situation, our findings show that despite offering equality of opportunity to pitch and talk, informal hierarchical modes of communication and existing power structures exclusions continue within unconferecing. Through the actions and behaviors of organizers, unconferences continue to embody Habermasian assumptions that inclusion will follow from a commitment to equality and diversity of participation (see Oswick & Noon, 2014 for a discussion). Indeed, Fraser and Young’s feminist critiques of Habermasian deliberation were

reflected in practice through the ways that participants, particularly those who were less well established in their careers, described feeling left out and/or silenced within unconferencing events. Thus, consistent with the feminist critique of the Habermasian approach to inclusivity, unconferencing fails to challenge hidden hierarchies and exclusions.

However, as discussed earlier, persistence of such hidden hierarchies should not be interpreted as an indication of the impossibility of inclusive communication. Rather hierarchies can be seen as a stimulus (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) to challenge implicit inequality (Adams, 2006) and develop more explicitly inclusive practices (Brewis et al., 2020; Dar et al., 2021). Thus to enable unconferences to achieve inclusive forms of communication and knowledge creation that their proponents aspire to (Boule, 2011; Budd et al., 2015), drawing on both feminist (Fraser, 1990; Young, 1996, 1999) and new social movement (Crass, ND.; Freeman, 1972; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Reedy et al., 2016) theory, we argue that explicit practices of inclusion (see Table 2) need to be added to the implicit forms of inclusion that unconferences already promote. These rules (Owen, 2008) make explicit the practices that can support inclusion. Through this we add to existing CME literature by proposing a number of explicit practices of inclusion that can be adopted to develop more inclusive forms of unconferencing and learning.

Explicitly inclusive practices call for organizers and participants to become conscious of, and then actively seek to challenge, power inequalities and wider forces that may undermine inclusivity and perpetuate exclusive practices. As Reedy, King and Coupland argue, in many new social movements' participants are "often acutely aware of this tension and the tendency of power differentials to establish themselves" (2016: 1565). Reedy and colleagues demonstrate how new social movement participants become conscious of these challenges and seek to develop practices to overcome them. Such groups develop counter practices, forms of explicit inclusion which regard "certain power inequalities [as] inevitable

[i.e. race, class, access to knowledge] and [assert] that they need to be countered through a particular practice” (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 116). Building on these principles we argue that unconferencing can be combined with a series of explicitly inclusive practices (akin to the kinds supported by feminist deliberative scholars like Fraser, 1990; and Young, 2002), which, in turn we believe, can make conferencing and collective learning environments more inclusive from the outset. It is to this approach we now turn, by considering where they might appear on the three levels examined in the literature review, individual, group and structural.

#### INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

First, at an individual level, explicit inclusion involves thinking explicitly about the voices that are heard and listened to and those that are unheard or silenced. Unconferences, as we have shown, try to provide a “level playing field” (Tricia, ConnectCamp) and encourage contributions from and interactions between a broad array of people by using informal rules (“been talking for a while, shut up!”). However, guidance that tries to nudge people in an inclusive direction often falls short. Practicing explicit inclusion would involve, for example, reflective sessions and conversations about who is invited and even how they are invited. As we have seen with research in to the wording of job recruitment advertisements, the language used in an invitation to apply (or in this case attend), can send messages of inclusivity (and exclusivity) long before an event even takes place (Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011).

Conferences could also be more explicitly inclusive by actively encouraging a broader range of communicative styles from rhetoric to storytelling (in the description of their event) so participants are expected to challenge convention rather than fit in to the norms of traditional communicative practices found within conferencing (Young, 2002).

More broadly, this might involve encouraging conference conveners and educators to consider how events or collective learning environments of this kind are designed. It would force organizers to engage with and discuss explicit inclusion practices from the range of

communicative styles and behaviors considered valuable to the ways that people are expected to interact, aimed at overcoming what we observed at unconferences as persistent communicative apprehension (Bernstein et al., 2020). It is important, we feel, to broaden the boundaries of what is traditionally considered to be articulate deliberative exchange so that this includes more than the formal, rational, masculinist modes of communication that so often dominate conferencing formats. As Young (1996: 124) states: “The norms of deliberation privilege speech that is formal and general...these norms of “articulateness” however must be learned: they are culturally specific, and in actual speaking situations in our society exhibiting such speaking styles is a sign of social privilege.” It is necessary to try and understand whether, and to what extent, these privileges can be overcome (or at the very least minimized), by making individually experienced learning environments within conferences more explicitly inclusive.

Second, at a group level, explicit inclusion moves beyond the assumption that greater involvement and participation will inevitably follow from egalitarian norms. Of course, allowing all participants to pitch and shape the agenda represents progress beyond the traditional exclusive conference format. But more can be done to promote inclusion explicitly. Building inclusion throughout the development of the event from its inception is vital; this involves broadening the pool of speakers, promoting the event early to give those with caring responsibilities time to plan, using gender-neutral language and making sure costs of attending are not prohibitive (Śliwa, Taylor, Tyler, & Vohra, 2021). For example, organizers could actively keep track of who is speaking and when in order to understand the extent of inclusivity in practice. Some activist organizations use Chris Crass’ leaflet “Tools for White Men and Other people Socialized in a Society Based on Domination”. This leaflet includes suggestions like, “at meetings – how many gender privileged men (biological men), how many women, how many transgendered people, how many white people, how many

people of color, is it majority heterosexual [and] ... Count how many times you speak and keep track of how long you speak” (Crass, ND.). Activists use these practices to make conscious and challenge their communicative practices (Maeckelbergh, 2009). Integrating reflective sessions half-way (or even a quarter-way) through conferences and “taking stock” of the kinds of interactions taking place and what could be done to improve them can help organizers to make collective observations and adjustments that might otherwise be missed.

Attentive listening “across diverse experiences, understandings, and/or ‘takes’ on specific situations and events” (Code, 2020: 17) is, we suggest, crucial in enacting more democratic practices of communicative exchange, both at conferences and in educational settings more broadly. Listening is of particular importance in engaging with inequalities in communicative exchange, including those related to race, ethnicity and gender. Conferences which are focused on communal listening, particularly to those who have systematically been denied voice and silenced, can be used to enable affective, as well as intellectual, engagement with and through others. Yet as Hendry, Mitchell, and Eaton (2018) observe, Western culture privileges speaking and has no epistemology of listening. Instead, Anglo-American intellectual thought emphasizes mastery through explanation and the verification of propositional claims based on fact finding. The cultivation of more attentive practices of listening therefore necessitates reevaluation of the ways of knowing that are dismissive of “such unquantifiable/unverifiable cognitive practices as listening, disputation and dialogue” (Code, 2020: 18). The development of attentive listening would require practice through deliberately framing conversations at conferences as opportunities for listening that also remain open to the possibility of silence as a means of learning and knowing (Dauenhauer, 1980).

Another approach might involve integrating inclusive ways of communicating in to the structures of deliberation, what Dryzek calls the “embodiment of communicative ethics in

rules of debate” (1990: 41). For instance, we might learn from sociocratic forms of organizing that involve “rounds” to ensure equity of voice for those in attendance based on rules explicitly designed to stop ‘cross-talking’ and domination of interaction (King & Griffin, 2019; Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018: 212-214). Sociocracy trains facilitators to identify and manage such processes to aid effective communication within the group. The aim of such inclusive processes is to help participants become aware of, and then to work towards altering the discursive, and embodied (Bell & King, 2010) patterns through which they operate. This involves giving individuals more freedom to experiment – but it also requires us to invent structures for these individuals to freely experiment within – structures that are dynamic and productive and within which they can collectively work towards outcomes that they might not have otherwise considered. This ultimately requires courage on the part of the organizing team – a willingness not to pre-plan or pre-organize speakers in a way that might make them feel vulnerable and perhaps even scared. This potentially provides insight into why explicit inclusion practices are so often avoided, as they are far from the easiest route to take when organizing group learning experiences like conferences, but we believe they can potentially lead to a much more rewarding experience for a broader range of people.

Finally, at the structural level, explicitly inclusive practices could be used more consistently and extensively to engender a widespread spirit of inclusion. We observed examples of this in unconferencing when organizers acted as guardians of the spirit of inclusion, by reinforcing the rules and holding open the space for others when possible. We also witnessed changes such as the rearrangement of rooms (into circles rather than rows) to make them more inclusive. However, we suggest deeper, more consistent explicit approaches to inclusion could be more deeply integrated into these events. For instance, some conferences now include real-time, feedback mechanisms (through online apps like Padlet)

which provide immediate routes of expression for those feeling excluded. The adoption of explicit norms and rules of communicative behavior might also be used to establish expectations about how people will address one another. Some conferences have already begun to adopt non-violent communication (NVC) as a broader way of guiding participants in their interactions that increase empathy and encourage consideration of alternative perspectives (Rosenberg, 2002). This kind of guardianship enables differences in experience that may otherwise be overlooked to be more fully and acknowledged.

Another practical example of explicit inclusion involves encouraging active bystander behavior so that when exclusive practices are noticed they are actively challenged (Scully & Rowe, 2009). Whilst unconferecing encourages “the law of two feet” sometimes walking away is not the best course of action as it prolongs exclusion for others. Explicitly encouraging people to become conscious and empowered to “speak out” when they recognize issues around inclusivity can help to actively break silos and cliques that emerge, sometimes unconsciously.

These practices of explicit inclusion, some of which can be identified within unconferecing can, we believe, be used to support sites of professional managerial learning that empower a wider array of people to actively participate. The intended outcome of this shift toward explicit inclusion is that greater attention is paid to voices and experiences that have for too long been unheard or silenced. This has potential to broaden and enrich the learning of all involved and to provide possibilities for progress where debates have become stale, circular or unproductive. Ultimately, we argue that explicitly inclusive practices can facilitate learning in sites like conferences by actively challenging persistent issues of sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination that continue to blight communication in these arenas of deliberative exchange.

## **CONCLUSION**



This paper began by recognizing that business schools and management educators need to take the issue of inclusion more seriously (Adamson et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2008), particularly in the light of the *#metoo* and *Black Lives Matter* movements (Bell et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2021; Chowdhury, 2021; Dar et al., 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

Unconferencing offers the possibility of an egalitarian, Habermasian approach to managerial learning by regularly invoking and utilizing implicit practices of inclusion. For this reason, we ourselves, since conducting this fieldwork, have continued to attend and even host unconferences. However, whilst these events hold promise, we have argued that explicitly inclusive practices are required in order to work through hidden forms of exclusion which persist within unconferences. These practices can help individuals to learn new, more inclusive, behaviors that they might not have formerly experienced such as by talking in rounds, experiencing different communicative styles and being aware of others more generally.

Whilst not offering a panacea, unconferencing also offers principles and lessons that can be translated into a business school context in a manner that CME proponents might aspire to, particularly practicing managers. The format and structure of unconferencing provides opportunities to reconfigure the way that management education is conducted, by encouraging educators to become more conscious of deliberative mechanisms used to foster explicitly inclusive educational environments. It can provide lessons to educators about how to integrate practices that tackle many of the issues identified by feminist scholars (Ayim, 1997; Fraser, 1990; Young, 1996), who have highlighted the exclusion that goes on in deliberative environments. For instance, pitching, particularly practicing managers, can enable learning opportunities to shape the content of sessions in ways that are more reflective of immediate challenges they face, broadening and making more immediately applicable the education experience. Sessions, through the emphasis on peer-learning, can also shift the

education experience away from the hierarchical acquisition of knowledge (Giroux, 2011), towards horizontal communication that can transform power dynamics (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018). The participatory nature of the unconference, particularly with the emphasis on surfacing explicit 'rules' to encourage active engagement by all and challenging domination by certain individuals, demonstrates the possibilities of shifting the learning environment in ways that can encourage greater inclusion. Finally, the role of the facilitator, as guardian of the commons, offers a way of reconfiguring the role of the management educator, whose central purpose is to encourage participation, shared learning and interaction. Drawing on feminist theory we propose explicitly inclusive practices (see Table 2 for a summary) that can surface hidden inequalities in the learning environment, which offer the possibility of collectively working through and overcoming persistent exclusionary practices.

More generally, unconferences offer a possibility to transform (some) aspects of conferences, and professional managerial learning by introducing new practices for inclusive learning. Unconferencing provides a foundation for a critical and deliberative approach to education that includes a wider variety of voices in the creation and experience of these environments. Clear deliberative mechanisms that consciously and implicitly uphold inclusive communication become the bedrock on which new knowledge and professional practices are developed. This will, we argue, ensure that traditional, hegemonic ways of thinking and doing are more challengeable and contestable by a wider variety of individuals and groups. The broader message we wish to convey from our study of unconferencing, however, is that business schools and management learning could be doing much more to encourage inclusive practices in these collective learning environments. We encourage others to do the same so that in time we can develop more inclusive sites of management learning both for our colleagues and our students.

**Table 1: Coding Themes**

Descriptions and critiques of conferences and unconferences	background to research participants	Background information on participants
	Camp	Definition and meaning, examples include BarCamps, FooCamps etc
	communication	How do people find out about the event?
	conference critiques	What do attendees dislike about the experience of attending conferences, how does this compare to unconferences
	digitization	Use of digital technology and software to capture and enable communication e.g. Hackpad, Slack, spreadsheet
	Financing	How is the event funded, how is this justified and explained, role of sponsors
	Freelance	Participants who work on a freelance basis, experience of freelance work
	Networking	Are existing networks a factor in attending events? Do attendees build new networks through events?
	participants	Information about participants, who they are, where they come from
	Pitching	Use of this technique in unconferencing
	Size	Number of participants, how justified
	Speeches	Keynotes, panel presentations, formal presentations
	unconference	Definition and meaning
	Networking	Are existing networks a factor in attending events? Do attendees build new networks through events?
Inclusion	conviviality	Are unconferences convivial events? How do participants respond to this?
	Discussion	Importance of, how it happens,
	Inclusion	How are people included/excluded?
	open source	Communities based on open source principles derived from software industry, also open source data
	organisation of space	How physical space is used, including arrangement of the room, coffee breaks, etc
	PowerPoint	Use of, reactions to, rules about, problems with
	Networking	Are existing networks a factor in attending events? Do attendees build new networks through events?
Wellbeing	Do unconferences contribute to the wellbeing of participants	
Hierarchy, horizontal group learning	democracy	Is the event democratic? How does this happen?
	Learning	Does learning take place at the events? How? How does this differ from 'conferences'?
	Pitching	Use of this technique in unconferencing

Leadership and guardians of the commons	facilitation	Who does this, how
	Discussion	Importance of, how it happens,
	open source	Communities based on open source principles derived from software industry, also open source data
	Hierarchy	Does hierarchy exist at these events? How is it reinforced?
	organisation of time	How is the time of the unconference used, including work time versus own time, i.e. holding events on Saturday
	rules	Rules of participation, how communicated/enforced?

**Table 2**

<b>Habermasian Framework</b>	<b>Critique of the Habermasian Framework</b>	<b>Unconferencing as an alternative</b>	<b>Critique of unconferencing</b>	<b>Explicitly Inclusive Practices</b>
Individuals engaged in rational exchange towards consensus	Privileges rational speech that excludes voices and alternative modes of communication which in turn undermines inclusive learning	“The beauty of an Unconference”: From exclusion towards inclusion of voices	Many voices from individuals and groups with less status still excluded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflective sessions on who is invited, who invites, what the content is (e.g. decolonizing the content, format)</li> <li>- Encourage a range of communicative styles of pitches and presentations</li> <li>- Reflection on how people are greeted and included on their arrival and within sessions (recognition of voice)</li> </ul>
Group rules around equality of opportunity for all to speak and participate	Equality of opportunity to speak/contribute which is not enough to include voices with less social capital in the deliberative process	“It’s kind of super-participatory”: From hierarchical to horizontal learning	Persistence of hierarchy means that mere equality of opportunity to speak to participate is not enough to encourage inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No cross talking</li> <li>- Train facilitators in inclusive practices</li> <li>- Diversity of the leads on sessions</li> <li>- Include sessions for first time speakers (no one senior can present)</li> <li>- Reflective sessions throughout the conference on how it is going (potential to change course)</li> <li>- Be brave – no pre-organizing or booking speakers or sessions</li> </ul>
Structure that encourages consensus and unity through collective deliberative exchange	Contains a spirit of inclusion but lacks explicit principles around inclusion – this leads to a focus on unity and a lack of emphasis on difference.	“Guardianship of the Commons”: Towards a spirit of engagement and inclusion	Explicit approach to inclusion, celebrating difference, not consistent across the unconferences leading to exclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explicit rules shaping norms of communicative behavior (non-violent communication etc)</li> <li>- Pay attention to room architecture and layouts in terms of inclusivity</li> <li>- Have clear “real time” mechanisms for feedback on how rules of inclusion are being experienced</li> <li>- Encourage active bystander behavior to promote inclusion</li> <li>- Actively break silos and cliques</li> </ul>

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<sup>i</sup> #manels All-Male Panels and #wanels All-White Panels have become popular hashtags, where speakers pledge (and call out where they seek this approach being broken) not to sit on panels that lack diversity, particularly around race and gender.

<sup>ii</sup> The British Academy of Management and Chartered Association of Business Schools in the UK have produced an excellent guide on making events more accessible and sustainable, see Śliwa, Taylor, Tyler and Vohra (2021) ALL WELCOME: A guide to inclusive, accessible and sustainable events, British Academy of Management and Chartered Association of Business Schools

<sup>iii</sup> Pseudonyms used throughout