The Course-Integrated Unconference: A Pedagogy of Courage and Mutual Trust

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Many Library and Information Science (LIS) educators focus on real-world applications of complex theories and philosophies. LIS students are simultaneously being prepared for positions in the field as well as for active participation in professional discourse so they can be involved in identifying issues and offering solutions to new and old problems in the profession. Within a course, students engage with problems that the instructor has identified and included in the syllabus; often there is little time to discuss current social and political events that impact libraries and library services. This article describes how incorporating an Unconference into a graduate-level LIS course encourages the students to identify issues in the profession that matter to them as individuals and future practitioners. An Unconference is a meeting model in which the participants determine and take responsibility for the content. A course-integrated Unconference builds flexibility into the course's structure and schedule. It creates intentional space for meaningful conversations about issues that interest the students, elevating their voices and experiences while inverting typical classroom power dynamics. Participating in planning and conducting the Unconference gives graduate students valuable professional experience and empowers them to take control over their education. The Unconference described in this article is part of an online course and, as such, the model presented will also be useful to professional organizations as they consider other ways to move meetings, conferences, and idea-sharing into online environments.

Keywords: Unconference, participatory learning, online learning, student engagement, innovative pedagogy, teaching philosophy, LIS education

In the decade during which I have offered an online synchronous Collection Development course in a Library and Information Science (LIS) graduate program, the course content has evolved with changes in our field. As I remove some elements to make room for new topics and concerns, I attempt to balance the content so that the course feels fresh to me and interesting to a new group of students. Dean and Forray (2020) describe this as curation, explaining "As educational curators, our course designs set up a cogent path through the content that we have carefully culled from a variety of sources, choosing materials we think will allow students access to the learning objectives without dictating the meaning the students take from them" (p. 528). Like all instructors, I make these adjustments

KEY POINTS:

- The structure of graduate-level education often leaves little flexibility for incorporating current events or topics of immediate concern.
- Unconferences have been used in professional development settings as a way to encourage more participant engagement.
- Unconferences can be integrated into courses as a way of creating space for new topics and as a means of empowering students.

Journal of Education for Library and Information Science 2023
Vol. 64, No. 3 DOI: 10.3138/jelis-2020-0096

and plans and yet a news story or current event may supersede a prepared class session, causing me to jettison carefully-selected content so that we can incorporate conversations about social or political events impacting library services. During COVID-19 many faculty have found themselves adjusting their syllabi to address the pandemic; however, student interest in current events is nothing new. My students have wanted and needed to talk about book weeding scandals, drag queen story time, and the role of the library's collections during times of social unrest.

In addition to wanting its content to feel timely, I continually modify my course realigning it as my educational philosophy and approach to the subject evolve. Today, my framing of the course presents Collection Development as a tangible history of power and privilege. Through this framing, I have confronted my own privilege in this profession and society and as the individual in a class with arguably the most power: the one who controls the content and the gradebook. I intentionally avoid the term "teaching" because it implies that I am the one doing the difficult work. "Learning" can and should be much more challenging, so "learning" is what I am focused on when interacting with students in the course. I see myself as a facilitator (or a curator) of learning experiences; my role is to create a structure and an environment that facilitate student learning and discovery. I am there to help them do the challenging and transcendent work of "learning." This shift in my perspective has inspired me to look for ways to center the students' experience, giving them more control over their education.

As LaPointe observes when reflecting about helping to plan an Unconference as a graduate student: "The classroom always harbors a power divide, no matter how many times we move desks from rows into welcoming circles" (LaPointe, Mehrotra, and O'Brien, 2011, p. 350). Dean and Forray (2020) encourage educators to rethink those hierarchies as well asserting that "to assume the knowledge-holders and truth-keepers are always educators, that we are the final arbiters, runs counter to experiential learning's adherence to a co-learning model of engagement" (p. 527).

As I developed my course, I wanted to create a schedule with enough flexibility for us to be able to intentionally address current events. I also wanted to share power in the classroom and schedule more student-driven content so that I could elevate and honor their voices and experiences in order to empower them to see themselves as valued contributors to professional conversations. This desire to increase both topical flexibility and student agency led me to experiment with holding an Unconference as a class project for my graduate-level collection development course, a course that typically has 20–26 students. Over the past five semesters I adjusted the Unconference based on student feedback and my own observations.

The Unconference model

Through the different adaptations, products, goals, and outcomes, the underlying premise of an Unconference reflects what I wanted to include in my course:

> At its core, unconference events are participant driven. From topics to participation, from goals to agendas, the unconference works to organically surface interests and problems relevant to those attending, provide a place for them to work, and relies on the

> contributions of each participant to move group defined goals forward (Hale & Bessette, 2016, p. 10).

Conferences are, generally, organized by an entity (an individual, a committee, an organization) that determines the topics that will be discussed, creating a top-down structure. Experts are brought in to share their knowledge with the audience members and, as Sweeting and Hohl (2015) note, "to a large extent, attending a conference can be a passive experience" (p. 2).

Unconferences developed as an alternative to this traditional conference model and have been around in some form for decades. Hale and Bessette (2016) credit Owen's Open Space Technology (OST) as being the inspiration for Unconferences explaining that Owens sought to change "the way meetings and conferences were structured in order to promote more open communication among the participants or attendees" by starting with "a marketplace of ideas, which then moves into organizing in a schedule organically based on interest" (p. 11).

While a traditional conference has an organizing body that reviews submissions, an Unconference allows the participants to pick the topics that will be discussed. In a traditional conference, sessions have one (or more) presenters who share their knowledge; in an Unconference, knowledge is shared by the participants themselves. In other words, in a conventional conference the driving assumption is: There are experts, and we should listen to them. In an Unconference that assumption is flipped: In this room there is expertise, and we should listen to each other.

First held in Philadelphia in 2010 as a professional development alternative for teachers, EdCamp is one of the most known names in Unconference models. EdCamp offers templates for others who want to host an Unconference and estimates there have been nearly 2,000 EdCamps worldwide.

In addition to EdCamp, Unconferences are used in a wide variety of disciplines, including faculty development, technology, design, and health sciences fields. Libraries have also utilized the format including the Western New York Library Resources Council which solicits Unconference themes for future conferences from previous conference attendees (McCormick, Adams, Dunbar, & Mclean-Plunkett, 2020). The University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Library modified the Unconference format to solicit input from faculty about potential topics during UNLV's campus-wide "research week" (Murray & Carson, 2018). In 2010, Lawson published a guide for libraries hosting an Unconference titled *Library Camps and Unconferences*.

There seems to be agreement among those who organize and write about Unconferences that this model increases the potential for participants to be more involved with the material and, consequently, engage in deeper learning as a result. Seemingly unaware of the Unconference phenomenon, Verbeke (2015) described them when he mused "one could even see an academic conference as a situation of peer-to-peer learning, where the focus is on learning for everyone, by everyone, about any conference-related issue" (p. 99).

There are numerous articles with advice on how to conduct and organize an Unconference. One of the more cited articles about Unconferences was written in a participant-driven

spirit. Budd et al. (2015), published "Ten Simple Rules for Organizing an Unconference," a crowd-sourced list of rules solicited from people with diverse Unconference experiences.

While most Unconferences are conducted at the faculty or professional level, the literature also supports the conclusion that participating in an Unconference can empower graduate students. LaPointe reflected on how helping to plan an Unconference as a graduate student in social work "challenged [the classroom's] typical hierarchies" and that "[t]he collaborative planning process and the event itself … placed the power divide in a box and lost the key" (LaPointe, Mehrotra, & O'Brien, 2011, p. 350). Within the LIS field, two graduate students wrote of their experiences attending the InfoCampSC Unconference as School Media graduate students at the University of South Carolina. During the event, one of the students volunteered to host a session and later reflected on that experience: "What I take away from InfoCampSC is the ability to more effectively and comfortably share my ideas with other information professionals" (Shier & Higgins, 2012, p. 38). While the literature contains these examples of Unconferences for training professionals and testimonies of graduate students, the literature is silent on models for integrating an Unconference as a learning activity in a class setting as part of the coursework.

In addition, much of the literature is focused on setting up the physical space for maximum idea-sharing and comfort including Calder's suggestion of including "two or three comfortable chairs—or even benches—strewn hither and yon in hallways and corners" (Watrall, Calder, & Boggs, 2013, p. 135). Given that my course is online, I sought, but could not find, guides for how to plan and conduct an Unconference in a completely online space. Even discussions of Unconferences used to discuss online pedagogy—such as the one hosted by Santa Barbara City College—are face-to-face events (Bernstein, 2019). As such, while I sought to create a new learning experience drawing on what I knew about Unconferences and my experience in online education, I needed to frame it differently from how Unconference organizers typically do.

Including an Unconference in a course

Most Unconference organizers can explain this unconventional format to potential participants by comparing it to a traditional conference. Since Unconferences are being introduced in fields that have conferences, organizers can usually assume that participants are familiar with conference formats and structures and then can explain an Unconference by indicating the ways in which it differs. The students in my Collection Development class are not in rigid cohorts with a shared experience through the program; some might be in their first semester and others could be preparing for graduation. LIS students are also far from a homogenous demographic in terms of previous experience. Some are entering graduate school directly from undergraduate, while others, having worked in libraries for years, are now seeking an LIS degree, while yet others are returning to school for their second or third career. LIS students may or may not have attended an academic or professional conference; thus, most are unfamiliar with the standard structure and its limitations. Therefore, even though I call the class project an "Unconference," that term may not immediately resonate with students.

I have learned that I need to clarify to students how conferences work by showing them a program from an actual professional conference. I show them that there are set session times

(I refer to these as "rounds") that have concurrent events ("sessions") in different rooms. I explain that attendees have to select from the offerings during that time slot and that a common experience is the frustration of feeling that one round has too many interesting sessions while another has almost nothing that represents one's interests.

Another difference between the classroom and an Unconference hosted by a professional organization is that the latter attract participants with some level of previous knowledge or expertise in the subject. At the beginning of the semester, with the exception of some students currently working in a library, the majority of my students have little or no knowledge of Collection Development. Some are very interested in the material and others are taking the course because they have been encouraged to by an advisor or because they think they "should." Consequently, there are different levels of interest and expertise among the students each semester. Billsberry, Kenworthy, Hrivnak, and Brown (2013) caution against attempting an Unconference with participants who lack subject expertise, asserting:

> It is clear that the [Unconference] format works particularly well when you bring together people who are both well informed about a topic and passionate about it. When participant contributors are either experts or newly yet deeply engaged in the literature, they can get to the crux of the matter readily to talk about cutting-edge ideas. However, our fear is that the format would work poorly if the event were populated by a majority of people new to their respective interest areas (p. 178).

Nevertheless, instead of entertaining their fear, I chose to focus on Dean and Forray's (2020) call to be brave and to challenge myself as an educator, believing that an Unconference activity would both empower my students and give them an opportunity to grow.

My course-integrated Unconference

In the first class of the semester, I introduce the course and briefly cover the different assignments. I mention the Unconference, but I do not go into detail because I do not want to overwhelm the students. I also understand that participating in the planning and execution of the Unconference will require a great deal of trust from the students which, in the first week of class, I have not yet earned. The Unconference itself is held during the last class meeting, typically Week 16 in the semester. As shown in Table 1, the planning process incorporates several deadlines leading up to the event.

To generate topics from the students, I have a discussion board in the course management system called "Unconference Inspirations." The discussion board instructions ask the students to post any text (article, podcast, news story, blog post, etc.) related to Collection Development that they would like to discuss more in-depth and provide a brief (i.e., tweet-length) summary of it. It can be something related to a topic from our class, something they hear about from another class, or something they find out in the world; the only rule is that it must be something they find interesting. I ask them to link their topic to an outside text because I want their colleagues to know something about it before voting later for Unconference topics.

Table 1: Schedule of Unconference Planning over a 16-week semester

Week 1	Briefly mention Unconference in class; materials about the Unconference are available in the Course Management System (CMS)
Week 5	First reminder to the students that they need to post a potential topic; more detailed description of what an Unconference is
Weeks 6–9	Weekly mentions of the Unconference including explaining our planning process
Week 10	Deadline for students to post a potential topic
Week 11	Students vote on topics
Week 12	In-class discussion of Unconference planning
Week 13	Session schedule is complete; students sign-up for Unconference roles
Week 15	Students pre-register for Unconference sessions
Week 16	Unconference

Students get participation points for posting an idea to the "Unconference Inspirations" discussion forum by the end of Week 10. This time frame gives the students ample time to learn about and explore different aspects of collection development, which in part mitigates the focal concerns of Billsberry, Kenworthy, Hrivnak, and Brown (2013). We read and discuss issues concerning the power structure of the publishing industry, different selection tools, acquisition methods—including purchasing and licensing—and how to balance all of that with a community's needs. Students have assignments which require them to practice skills and concepts we cover in class. Around the fifth week I remind them about the Unconference and begin to mention it more frequently. By then students have received feedback from me on assignments and are becoming more comfortable with and knowledgeable about Collection Development.

As all instructors have seen in class discussions, some students are hesitant to initiate a discussion while others demonstrate more confidence in their ability to make worthwhile contributions. Since part of my goal for the Unconference is to honor all student voices and upset the typical power dynamics in an academic course, I require all students to make at least one post in the Unconference Inspirations discussion board.

After the Week 10 deadline, I group similar topics together and create a poll where students vote on the topics that most interest them. Sorting the topics into themes can be a little tricky, but it is necessary to winnow the Unconference down to a manageable number of sessions. I skim through all of the recommended texts, looking for patterns and overlap that I can combine into broader topics. I then post these broader topics and create a space where students can vote on their top four or five choices. In the semesters that I have asked for four choices, I have a better feel for what students are really interested in; in the semesters that I have asked for five choices I have greater flexibility in creating the schedule.

Once I have the students' top choices, I create the schedule with three rounds of sessions (three rounds was a decision made by the first semester's Unconference students). This step is the most labor-intensive in the planning process. While I attempt to create a schedule where every student has one of their top choices in each of the three rounds, this is not always

possible. I have succeeded in making sure that all students have one of their choices in at least two of the three rounds but this means that sometimes I schedule a topic with fewer votes just so more students will have an interest represented. I also strive to create a schedule in which each session will have three to eight participants. In some semesters, there are topics which generate a lot of interest; in other semesters the votes are more evenly distributed across the topics. A list of topics, votes, and schedules of five semesters of Unconference is available in the Appendix.

As an example, in Spring 2019, the most popular topic (with 15 or 75% of the students voting for it) was what to do "when classics go bad," meaning when we learn that authors or performers who have been beloved actually held or promoted offensive, criminal, or otherwise problematic beliefs and actions. The examples we touched upon included Bill Cosby, Mark Twain, Dr. Seuss, and H. P. Lovecraft. The second most popular topic (12 or 60%) was about toxicity in social media spaces frequented by librarians (specific *Twitter* hashtags and *Facebook* groups were mentioned). I combined the topics of LGBTQ+ (five votes) and diversity (six votes) for another 11 students, while nine students expressed an interest in discussing Ettarh's (2018) article on vocational awe and how it manifests in Collection Development. Five students wanted to discuss the responsibility libraries have in providing materials that are scientifically accurate (specifically concerned with anti-vaxxer content) and four students wanted to talk about open access. Another four voted for bias in subject headings as a topic, but those four students' interests were already represented in the other topics.

I could have scheduled just one session for each topic and had all 12–15 interested students join, but I instead decided to repeat the more popular topics in different rounds so that each group could be small enough to have an inclusive discussion. In order to spread out the participants across sessions, I look at what else each student is interested in and intentionally schedule their only opportunity to attend another desired topic at the same time as one of the popular sessions. With notes indicating the votes of each student, I pour over the arrangement trying to make sure everyone has at least two sessions they want to attend and that no session would have too many attendees for a fruitful discussion. I choose to invest this much time into the schedule creation because I want the students to be able to participate in the conversations that interest them since they have selected and driven the content. I realize, however, that a less time-consuming option could be to limit the sign-up spaces for each session in order to guarantee small groups. Table 2 shows the spring 2019 schedule.

After creating the schedule of sessions, I ask the students for feedback to make sure I did not miss anything. Next the students sign up to be either a "facilitator" or a "notetaker" for at least one session. I explain that the facilitation is "seeding" the conversation by prompting with some questions but is not a presentation. The student who originally suggested the topic has the first opportunity to offer to facilitate that session before I open it up to others. The notetaker is asked to post a summary of the discussion to a discussion board after the Unconference so that people who could not attend the session can still get the gist of the conversation. Based on feedback from students, I am adding the role of "moderator" so that all students get a chance to speak during the breakout room sessions.

Table 2: Spring 2019 Unconference Schedule

Round One	Toxicity in librarian social media Vocational awe Diversity & LGBTQ+ When classics go bad
Round Two	Toxicity in librarian social media Diversity & LGBTQ+ When classics go bad Libraries, responsibility, & "accurate" content
Round Three	Toxicity in librarian social media Open Access When classics go bad Diversity & LGBTQ+

On the day of the Unconference we have three rounds of sessions with brief breaks between each. I explain to them that I am modeling this like a conference in which there is a chance to use the restroom or grab some snacks between sessions. This break gives me a chance to set up the next round of breakout rooms.

I do not lead or take notes for any of the sessions; I attend the Unconference solely as a participant. As a participant in this event, I choose sessions based on my interest and I try to make sure that different students "see" me each round. I do not go to all of the sessions to make sure that students are staying on task. Just as the students have trusted me by undertaking this unusual activity, I am trusting them to fully engage with each other in the sessions.

Comparing my course-integrated Unconference to best practices

When I created my course-based Unconference, I based it on my limited Unconference experiences and did not look for rules or best practices. Now that I have held a course Unconference for five semesters, I find it interesting to compare what I have done and the adjustments I have made with a classic guide to planning Unconferences, Budd et al.'s (2015) "Ten Simple Rules for Organizing an Unconference."

1. **How to decide whether to run an event as an Unconference or as a traditional conference.**

   The authors note that Unconferences allow for "exchanges of knowledge from many to many" and allow participants to make connections (Budd et al., 2015, p. 2). My course has students who are interested in different types of libraries and the Unconference also gives them one final course-integrated opportunity to connect with classmates who have shared professional interests (academic, public, youth, etc.) and create a community of praxis. Students also get to share their expertise based on knowledge from previous degrees, classes, or experiences which encourages them to see themselves and each other as contributors to the field.

2. **Choose the right format.**

   Unconferences can be organized in many ways and the way I have chosen is considered a "'curated unconference' where topics and structures are collected by potential participants prior to the event. A group of organizers, in a transparent and open procedure, then sort through these ideas to build a structure of large and/or small-group discussion" (Budd et al., 2015, p. 2). By doing all the planning in the course management system, the procedure is open and transparent.

3. **Have a clear mission for the meeting.**

   The authors note that a clear mission is an "effective way of focusing ideas for the content and structure of the event" and "help(s) to create an environment conducive to valuable and appropriate learning" (Budd et al., 2015, p. 3). Each time I remind the students about posting in the Unconference Inspirations discussion forum, I also remind them of the purpose and our goals for the event.

4. **Minimize the lecture-style presentation.**

   The ethos of an Unconference is to not have one person sharing knowledge, but to facilitate knowledge building and sharing among the participants. Occasionally students will ask if they can give a presentation when they facilitate a session because they have researched the topic for another class. When this request has happened, we talk about it in class so the participants will know what to expect, and I agree that the facilitator can give a mini-lecture (no more than five minutes) and then open it up to discussion. I try to allow them to share their knowledge while also remembering that the goal of the event is to hear from others.

5. **Involve participants in planning and structuring of the event.**

   I involve the students in the planning, but not the structuring. I take care of what Budd et al. (2015) refer to as "logistical organization" (p. 4) but all content is suggested and selected by the students. I honestly do not see how I could involve them in the structuring within the online class setting.

6. **Provide an open, relaxed atmosphere.**

   While much of what is covered in this rule addresses ice-breaker activities and physical space, the observations about participants needing to feel safe in order for the event to succeed carry over. Our Unconference is on the last day of class. By that time, we know each other and have developed a mutual respect and trust. Students are often concerned about their grade, and I continually reassure them that they are only evaluated on showing up and participating. There is no way for them to do it "wrong," as long as they are there and fulfill their roles (facilitate or take notes for a conversation). Hopefully by this point in the semester the students know that I am interested in and value their learning and their perspectives.

7. **Trust your community.**

   I find that the way Budd et al. (2015) describe the value in trusting their community resonates with the goals I have for my students:

> Responsibility for the success of the event is more equally distributed across all participants … In an unconference format, the organizers will be successful if they trust the community to work with them to make the event a success. This power shift is worth embracing, rather than resisting, as it brings many exciting and energizing opportunities. Sharing leadership with the participants will create an atmosphere of personal empowerment, individual responsibility, and group ownership of the events. (p. 5)

I want my students to take responsibility for their own learning and to feel empowered. I want them to feel confident contributing to future professional-level conversations in different venues, and I hope this Unconference helps build that confidence.

8. **Communication is key to your event; make it as easy, unambiguous, and transparent as possible.**
   Communication is key when planning this over the course of several weeks in a class setting. Students without any conference or Unconference experience do not understand what I am asking of them and are worried about how they will be graded on something they do not understand. I talk with them about this anxiety and tell them that it is natural. I share with them stories from previous semesters to help describe the event and explain the planning process. Under this rule Budd et al. also recommend using online collaborative tools to share ideas beforehand. We do this through the course management system.
9. **The journey is as important as its destination.**
   Budd et al. (2015) encourage keeping a record of the content discussed as "a resource for reflecting on the work done, enabling participants to think about the issue in different ways, allowing others to see the progress of the discussion, establishing ideas for future events, and building a network of collaborators" (p. 6). I ask the notetakers to post their notes in a discussion forum but since it is the last day of the semester, I do not know how many students go back to look at them later. Immediately after the Unconference we have a brief discussion on the experience, and after class they are asked to write a brief reflection of the semester including the Unconference.
10. **No idea is too trivial.**
    I honor this rule by having the students vote on *all* submitted topics. I combine some, but I do not eliminate any.

Lessons learned and some advice

This semester will be my sixth in-class Unconference and each iteration reflects lessons I learned from previous semesters. Even though Unconferences are becoming more common, many organizers do not assume that their participants will arrive knowing how to participate in the event. While each semester I give more information to the students to explain Unconferences, I have not yet selected any readings to assign about them, but I think I will this semester.

As I review my efforts to group similar topics, I see that I tend to err on having more topics instead of fewer. While I know this tendency is out of a desire to respect the students' voices, I now think it creates redundancy and possible confusion. I recommend more loosely-fitting groupings of topics so that participants have more room for discussion. I also changed how students post their ideas. Last semester I asked students to phrase their topic as a discussion question, and this rephrasing helped to provide some structure to the session discussions. Additionally, while I believe almost every topic can be relevant to the work of Collection Development, and I hope by Week 16 the students are making those connections, this coming semester I am going to ask students to explicitly connect their topic post to Collection Development.

As all instructors who schedule in-class group work have experienced, it is difficult to know how much time to allot to an activity. Online that is even harder because you cannot easily observe if conversations are robust or waning. For the Unconference, I have tried 15-minute and 20-minute sessions and received the predictable "too short" and "too long" feedback. I encourage faculty wanting to try this to observe their class for several weeks and select a time length that seems best for the interactivity level seen with that specific group of students.

The first versions of the Unconference were with Blackboard Collaborate, which allowed the students to move themselves into breakout rooms so they could pick the sessions they wanted to attend in the moment. When we switched to Zoom, our iteration required the host (the instructor) to manually move students into breakout rooms. Consequently, I required students to pre-register for sessions prior to the Unconference via a *Google Doc* so that I could move them during the session breaks. I linked the session-specific texts in the same *Google Doc* and students started adding other texts to it before the Unconference. I was pleased to see them expanding the discussion before it happened; having them preregister helped them be better prepared to participate in those sessions. It also helped me see which sessions should be cancelled due to lack of interest despite my scheduling efforts. Our current version of Zoom does allow participants to move themselves, but I continue to require preregistration.

While it is tempting to modify my course's content based on the topics that emerge in the Unconferences, I have realized that doing so would mean I am chasing previous students' interests instead of being responsive to this semester's students. For example, after the first semester in which nine students were interested in prison libraries (45% of the 20 enrolled), it was tempting to add a reading to the following semester's syllabus; however, "prison libraries" has not been suggested as an Unconference topic since that first semester. Similarly, students in the Fall of 2018 also wanted to have a Library Poetry Jam in which they could share poems about libraries or read their own. No other semester has included performance-focused sessions. As noted earlier, in spring 2019 the students were interested in "when classics go bad" which coincided with news stories about Bill Cosby's prison sentence. This topic was not as pressing for the students in subsequent semesters. Not surprising, in spring 2020 students wanted to talk about COVID-19 but many also wanted a break from thinking about the pandemic and elected to discuss other topics. I have learned that I cannot predict what will catch students' attention and that, while I need

to offer structure and guidance so the experiment is not stressful to the students, I have to resist any desire to steer the direction of the conversations.

This model for an Unconference also has applications beyond the classroom. Professional organizations that are recreating conferences online due to the global pandemic or out of an interest in being more environmentally sustainable could follow this example to plan and host an online Unconference elevating the voices and experiences of participants from around the world.

Conclusion

Having an Unconference as part of my class allows me the opportunity to learn from my students. I can track their interests and how they change from semester to semester. While course evaluations and feedback from students helps us, as faculty, for future semesters, the Unconference allows me to be responsive to *this* semester's students' interests in real time.

Students have responded favorably to the Unconference experiment. In the course evaluations students have said they liked the Unconference because "we got to discuss topics that felt relevant to us in a small group setting," "[the Unconference] gave me the opportunity to further explore interesting topics," and that the Unconference created "less stress and pressure to just chat with other students about different topics." In one semester the students suggested that the Unconference be done twice—once earlier in the semester and once at the end. I have not followed that suggestion because I think that halfway through the semester the students do not yet have enough grounding in Collection Development and have not yet built the comradery necessary for the Unconference to succeed. However, it is encouraging to see this evidence of how much they enjoy the activity.

Incorporating an Unconference in a graduate-level LIS course takes careful work and planning. Creating a schedule that maximizes each student's opportunity to participate in discussions that interest them is time-consuming and complicated—and also completely worthwhile. It also takes a willingness to let go of the reins. Dean and Forray (2020) offer encouragement for educators-as-curators willing to take risks: "Curators are brave. They allow disparate and conflicting opinions on materials from students, but in stepping away from creating and advocating for particular models and content, curators create a space where additional possibilities can flourish" (p. 531). An Unconference created and implemented by graduate students creates this space.

In addition to requiring bravery on the part of the instructor, an Unconference requires the students to be brave and to trust each other. This experience helps them to develop confidence in the subject matter and to see themselves and each other as professionals with expertise worthy of sharing. Done well, an Unconference is reminiscent of a good graduate-level class according to reflections on Unconference experiences: "The best sessions by far had the feel of an engaging graduate seminar class, with contributions coming from everyone, and where there was freedom for even the topic to evolve with the discussion" (Watrall, Calder, & Boggs, 2013, p. 135). When incorporated into a course, an Unconference empowers students to take responsibility for their course content and their education. As Budd et al. (2015) note, "Perhaps the key is thinking of the [Unconference] as 'we' instead of 'me'" (p. 6).

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Appendix: Five semesters of Unconferences

Fall 2018 (20 enrolled students)

Table A.1: Fall 2018 votes and topics

Votes	Topic
9	Prison libraries
9	Neutrality and library collections
6	Accessibility and compassion (including hospice librarianship)
6	Supporting LGBTQ+ communities (including Drag Queen Storytime)
5	LGBTQ+ collections for youth
5	"Ownership" of space in the academic library (balancing students, faculty, and staff desires)
5	Digitization
5	Children's literature
4	Library Poetry Jam
4	Open Access
3	Libraries building trust
2	Library resources for Spanish-speaking populations
2	Self-publishing
1	Primary sources
0	Crowd-sourcing digitization

Table A.2: Fall 2018 Unconference schedule

Round One	Prison libraries Children's literature Supporting LGBTQ+ communities Ownership of space Library Poetry Jam
Round Two	Supporting LGBTQ+ communities Ownership of space Neutrality Digitization Accessibility and Compassion
Round Three	Prison libraries Supporting LGBTQ+ youth Children's literature Neutrality Ownership of space

Spring 2019 (26 enrolled students)

Table A.3: Spring 2019 votes and topics

Votes	Topic
15	When classics go bad
12	Toxicity in librarian social media spaces
9	Vocational awe
6	Diversity in collections
5	LGBTQ+ collections, youth and teens
5	Responsibility of libraries to have materials that are based on scientific evidence
4	Open Access
4	Bias in subject headings and library book arrangement
3	Comics
2	Special collections and collecting “treasures”
1	Librarians as copyright police
1	Sexual harassment of library workers
1	Outsourcing collection development
1	Responsibility of libraries to protect patrons’ privacy (with vendors)
0	Donated and/or self-published materials

Table A.4: Spring 2019 Unconference schedule

Round One	Toxicity in librarian social media spaces Vocational awe Diversity & LGBTQ When classics go bad
Round Two	Toxicity in librarian social media spaces Diversity & LGBTQ When classics go bad Libraries, responsibility, and “accurate” content
Round Three	Toxicity in librarian social media spaces Open Access When classics go bad Diversity & LGBTQ

Fall 2019 (26 enrolled students)

Table A.5: Fall 2019 votes and topics

Votes	Topic
15	Unusual or niche collections (library of things, human library)
13	Unsheltered populations (homelessness)
12	Censorship
8	Developing special collections
5	Data and collection development
5	Genre fiction
5	Collection development and information literacy
4	Collection development and environmental sustainability
3	eBooks
3	Crowdsourcing "librarian work" (collection development, research tools, etc.)
2	Library as publisher

Table A.6: Fall 2019 Unconference schedule

Round One	Unusual collections Censorship Unsheltered populations Special collections
Round Two	Censorship Unsheltered populations Collection development & information literacy Unusual collections
Round Three	Unsheltered populations Unusual collections Collection development & sustainability Censorship: library spaces

Spring 2020 (26 enrolled students)

Table A.7: Spring 2020 votes and topics

Votes	Topic
12	Nontraditional library collections (library of things)
11	Libraries' responses to COVID-19
10	Managing non-English language collections
8	Readers' advisory and social media
7	Mission creep or just part of the job? The expanding role of librarians
6	Lasting effects of COVID-19 on publishers and licensing
6	Biases (unconscious or explicit) in our collections
5	Evaluating specialized libraries
5	Finding new materials and communicating about them
5	Librarians and eLearning
5	Readers' advisory tools and practices
5	Virtual programming
4	State laws, censorship, and collection development
3	Censorship and online content
3	Digital content and accessibility
3	Graphic texts—more than just fiction
3	School librarianship
2	Buying trips for area studies
1	Measuring the impact libraries have on income inequality

Table A.8: Spring 2020 Unconference schedule

Round One	Nontraditional library collections Libraries and COVID-19 Readers' advisory Mission creep Graphic texts
Round Two	Biases COVID-19: publishing and licensing Identifying new content and communicating it Libraries and COVID-19 Non-English language collections
Round Three	Non-English language collections Readers' advisory eLearning Censorship Nontraditional library collections

Fall 2020 (24 enrolled students)

Table A.9: Fall 2020 votes and topics

Votes	Topic
11	The changing role of libraries as community partners
9	Library collections of "things"
9	Indigenous voices, cultures, & experiences reflected in collections
8	Library programming for adults
8	Censorship—Intellectual Freedom (a continuum)
8	Rural community outreach
7	LGBTQ+ collections
6	Diversity in collections
6	Freely available—Piracy (a continuum)
6	Inventorying collections
4	COVID-related changes
3	Makerspaces
3	Information literacy & collection development
3	Services to immigrant populations

Table A.10: Fall 2020 Unconference schedule

Round One	Changing role of libraries Library programming for adults Censorship ← → Intellectual Freedom Diversity in collections
Round Two	Rural community outreach Age classifications for collections Indigenous voices Free content ← → Piracy
Round Three	Collections of "things" Inventorying collections LGBTQ+ Changing role of libraries