



Exploring Learning Development: an Unconference approach

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Presentation abstract

The Unconference exemplified a participant-driven approach to professional collaboration and knowledge sharing, designed to challenge the traditional top-down structure of conferences. Rooted in principles of inclusivity, collaboration, and adaptability, the Unconference empowered attendees to shape the agenda, propose discussion topics, and lead meaningful conversations. Unlike conventional conferences, which often rely on pre-set schedules and expert-led presentations, the Unconference thrives on the collective expertise and lived experiences of its participants (Yeoh, 2024).

The primary aim of an Unconference is to create a democratic and interactive space where participants can collaboratively explore key issues, share best practices, and co-develop solutions. In the context of Learning Development (LD), the Unconference provided a unique platform for professionals to tackle pressing challenges. This event fostered supportive networks, encouraged the exchange of innovative ideas, and enabled reflection on the core values and practices that underpin LD.

The objectives of the Unconference aligned closely with the ethos of LD, which emphasises care, collaboration, and adaptability. By placing participant voices at the centre and encouraging diverse perspectives, the Unconference format mirrored the relational and inclusive practices central to LD (Gravett, 2025). Furthermore, the flexibility of the format supported iterative problem-solving and knowledge generation, enabling attendees to address complex challenges in real-time (Knapp, 2016). The Unconference also highlighted the importance of resilience and community-building in professional development. Drawing on the concept of fostering adaptability amidst uncertainty (Ungar, 2013), this event provided a space for participants to navigate the precarity of higher

education and co-develop strategies for sustainable growth and well-being (Kahn, Moreau, and Gagnon, 2024).

Particularly relevant to LD, the Unconference model promoted active engagement, peer-to-peer learning, and the co-creation of knowledge. By prioritising inclusivity and collaboration, the Unconference created an environment where learning developers can innovate, reflect, and collectively shape the future of their field.

The session followed a structured yet adaptable methodology inspired by design sprint frameworks, such as the Google Ventures model, which emphasises iterative problem-solving and participant-driven collaboration (Knapp, 2016). The process was organised into five key stages:

1. Objective setting: participants reflected on their motivations and goals for attending, identifying the areas they were most eager to explore.
2. Small group exploration: attendees formed small groups to discuss their unique challenges and share diverse perspectives, fostering initial brainstorming.
3. Theme identification: using a digital platform, participants collaboratively identified common themes and priorities, ensuring relevance and focus.
4. In-depth discussions: breakout sessions were organised around the identified themes, allowing participants to delve deeper into specific topics and co-create solutions.
5. Group sharing: insights, recommendations, and actionable ideas were shared with the larger group, enabling collective learning and reflection.

The session took place online and utilised Miro, a collaborative online platform, alongside Zoom to facilitate engagement and dynamic interaction. Miro enabled participants to visualise ideas, organise themes, and document insights in real-time, enhancing the overall collaborative experience.

Keywords: unconference; participant-driven approach; top-down conferences.

Community response

The community warmly embraced the Unconference session, which operated without a fixed agenda, offering a participant-driven format where attendees could shape their own topics of discussion, share insights, address challenges, and collaboratively envision the future of the Learning Development (LD) field. The engagement at the beginning of the session proved that attendees were intrigued by the opportunity to learn about the approach, and the use of the Miro platform played a key role in fostering engagement throughout.

Sandra Sinfield reflected on the session, stating, 'I had to wrestle with the discomfort of Miro – but I am so glad I persevered. It was great to have this opportunity to reflect with humane and compassionate colleagues about our priorities and where we might go'. This sentiment was echoed by other participants, including Christie Pritchard, who described the session as 'fabulous! Such an enjoyable session to help facilitate – nothing to add! Amazing work as always 😊'.

Carina Buckley, Session Chair, shared her experience:

It was a great experience. I had no idea at the start how it would work, but as it progressed, I could see we were moving through the stages quite organically. The group gained so much from it and appreciated the opportunity to share and explore topics in greater detail. By the end, it was quite exhausting, but from my perspective, it was absolutely worth it.

Kate Coulson, Session Chair, Group Lead, and Steering Group Chair, expressed her excitement, saying, 'This looks amazing! I'm feeling a mix of nerves and excitement for Friday afternoon'. Many participants, like Amy West and Steve Rooney, joined out of curiosity to explore the emergent nature of the Unconference, while others, such as Cath Senker, were drawn by their interest in highlighting pressing topics, including inclusive teaching and narrowing ethnicity awarding gaps.

The Unconference facilitated the emergence of several critical topics, including the need for clearer professional recognition, the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, and the value of fostering enjoyable learning experiences free from the constraints of higher education politics and bureaucracy. Participants Lovleen Kushwah and Geethanjali

Selvaretnam presented on the topic 'Developing resilience and discernment to feedback'. They reflected on how the dialogic and interactive nature of the Unconference enabled them to engage with peers and gain insights, including references to Michael Ungar's work on resilience, to support the evolution of their ideas.

Further discussions expanded on the concept of resilience, critically examining its implications for supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds and those who have experienced trauma. These discussions also introduced the idea of 'disruptive learning', exploring its connection to discomfort in learning and its potential to drive transformative educational experiences.

The session was not without challenges, particularly for those unfamiliar with Miro. Some attendees experienced difficulties accessing the platform, which led to moments of frustration. Comments like 'What are we supposed to do? I have never used Miro', highlighted the need for clearer guidance and support. Despite this, participants worked collaboratively to resolve issues, with one attendee humorously describing their experience as 'Miro aversion therapy'.

The Unconference concluded on a high note, with participants expressing gratitude for the opportunity to collaborate and reflect. As Sandra noted, 'it was a lovely space—thank you!'. Others, like Sara-Jane, summarised the experience as 'educational, edifying, and enjoyable!'. The sense of community was evident in comments such as 'Nice to chat/collaborate with ALDcon peeps', and 'Looking forward to next week!'.

These reflections underscore the value of the Unconference format in fostering open dialogue, critical engagement, and a sense of community within Learning Development. While technical challenges were encountered, the overall experience was seen as positive, with participants leaving inspired and eager to continue the conversations in future sessions.

Next steps and additional questions

Sandra Sinfield raised the vital topic of how we seed and harness creativity and joy as Learning Development practitioners, and in our practices with students and staff. Her reflections during the Unconference session underscored the need for creating space to work in slow, meaningful, and purpose-driven ways, even amid the turbulence of academia (Kahn, Moreau, and Gagnon, 2024). Sandra cautioned against the risks of overextending ourselves by continually filling the gaps created by restructurings and reprioritisations, which could leave us depleted and unable to sustain impactful work.

Sandra's vision for Learning Development calls for a higher education landscape that is humane, compassionate, reparative, and creative—one that resists the transactional trends driven by reductive notions of employability and cost-cutting. Drawing on the works of scholars like Karen Gravett (2025), she emphasised the importance of pedagogies of mattering and the value of care as a framework for rebuilding a more inclusive and joyful approach to education.

The Unconference format itself proved to be a powerful platform for enabling such discussions, fostering collaboration, and encouraging collective problem-solving. Its participant-driven structure allowed attendees to shape the agenda, reflect on their priorities, and co-create solutions, making it a uniquely flexible and inclusive approach to professional development.

Key Questions

1. How can the Unconference format be utilised to tackle systemic challenges in Learning Development, such as workload pressures, precarity, and the push for transactional education models?
2. What strategies can ensure that Unconference sessions are inclusive and amplify the voices of newer or marginalised participants, fostering equitable engagement?
3. How do we translate the ideas, connections, and insights generated during Unconference sessions into meaningful, sustained action and long-term change within the Learning Development community?

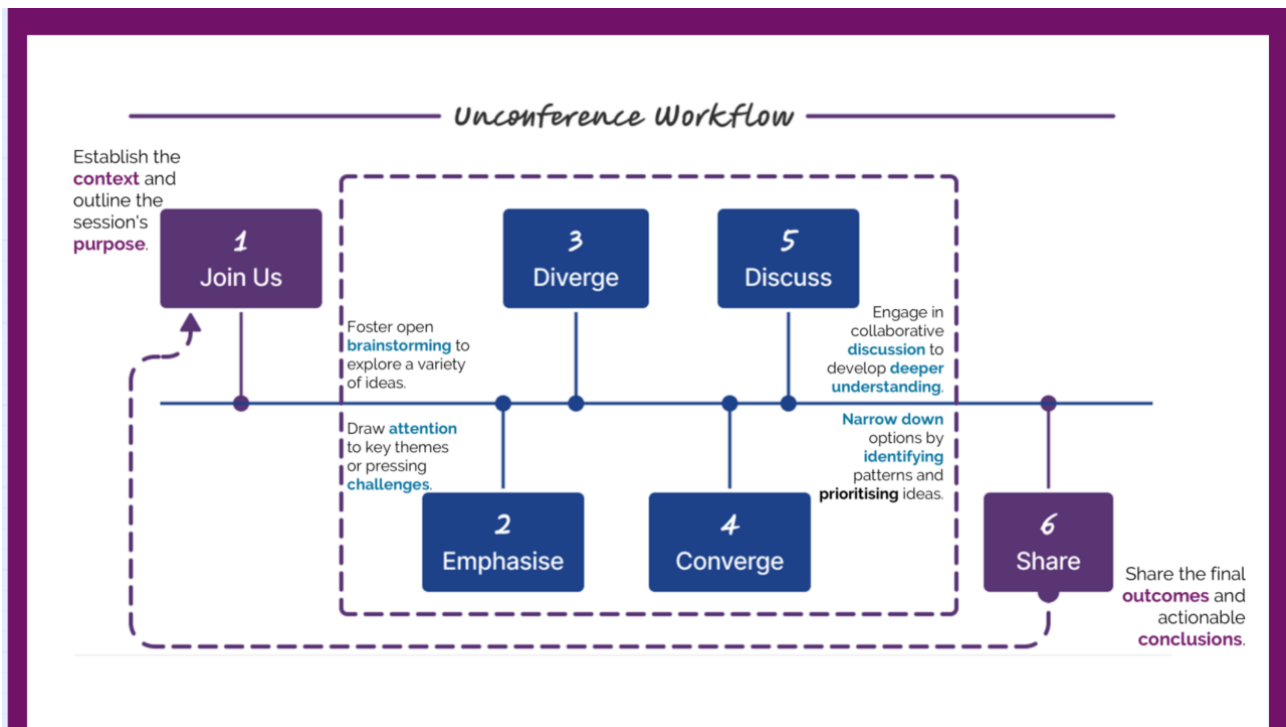
These questions highlight the potential of the Unconference model as a transformative approach to professional development, inviting us to reflect on how we can harness its strengths to build a more compassionate, creative, and collaborative future for Learning Development.

Author's reflection

The Unconference session provided a dynamic and democratic platform for the collaborative exploration of LD topics. Guided by a participant-driven format, the event created an environment where attendees could share insights, address challenges, and envision the future of the field beyond the constraints of traditional, structured programmes.

The session opened with a welcome and an introduction to the Unconference approach, which emphasises open dialogue and participant-led agenda-setting. Reflective activities invited attendees to identify both personal and shared learning objectives, laying a strong foundation for exploring new ideas. This process generated a wide range of discussion topics, from defining the unique identity of LD to examining the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on professional practices.

Figure 1. Unconference workflow: a six-step journey from exploration to actionable outcomes



Key themes emerged throughout the day, including the need for clearer professional recognition, increased interdisciplinary collaboration, and a focus on creating enjoyable learning experiences, free from the constraints of higher education politics and bureaucracy. These insights reflected a collective aspiration for a more humane and empowering learning environment. Participants expressed a desire for stronger advocacy and a well-defined professional identity, underscoring a shared commitment to elevating LD within the higher education sector.

The use of Miro, a collaborative online platform, enabled participants to engage in dynamic and interactive discussions. While some attendees were unfamiliar with Miro, its visual tools proved invaluable for organising ideas, documenting insights, and delving deeply into critical topics. Discussions prioritised innovative approaches, such as streamlining the integration of AI tools, personalising learning strategies to address diverse needs, and enhancing accessibility in education.

Participant feedback highlighted a strong interest in improving the collaborative experience, particularly through introductory training sessions to familiarise attendees with the tools. To address this, ongoing training opportunities will be provided throughout the

year, ensuring participants feel confident and prepared to engage with Miro and similar platforms. This initiative aims to significantly enhance the effectiveness and enjoyment of future Unconference sessions.

The session concluded on an energised note, with participants inspired to continue the dialogue beyond ALDcon25. The Unconference achieved its goals by promoting meaningful engagement, generating actionable insights, and igniting enthusiasm for ongoing collaboration. By combining the flexibility of the Unconference format with the collaborative power of Miro, the event demonstrated its potential as an innovative and inclusive method for tackling complex challenges in LD.

This session not only reinforced the value of participant-driven methodologies but also underscored the importance of balancing innovation with accessibility and inclusivity. The insights and strategies developed will inform future initiatives, ensuring LD continues to evolve as a dynamic and impactful field within higher education.

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AI was used to enhance the readability and clarity of this text. The content has been improved for coherence, grammar, and flow while ensuring the original meaning and intent remain intact. The author reviewed and approved all final edits.

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