Daring to Be Different: Unconferences, New Conferences, and Reimagined Conferences

Jon Billsberry¹, Amy L. Kenworthy², George A. Hrivnak², and Kenneth G. Brown³

In management education, 2013 is the Year of the Daring; a year for those daring to be different. “Daring to Be Different” is the bold theme of this year’s Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference (OBTC) taking place in Asheville, North Carolina, in June. Compared with other conferences, OBTC has always had a different edge to it, but this year they are turning up the amp to 11 and creating an innovative and supportive space for management educators to explore new ideas (http://obtc.org/content/2013).

The Academy of Management is similarly daring to be different this year with the launch of a new conference focused on management teaching. Called the “Teaching and Learning Conference at the Academy of Management,” or more catchily, the TLC@AOM, the one-day conference is situated on the Sunday between the professional development workshops and the scholarly program. The press release says that the “2013 TLC@AOM will (1) focus on practice to improve teaching and learning, addressing the needs of both novice and veteran members, and (2) represent all disciplines in AOM Divisions and interest groups with interdisciplinary topics and sessions.”

In addition to these two daring innovations, 2013 saw the first “unconference” in management education. The Research in Management Learning and Education (RMLE) Unconference was held on February 1, 2013 at Bond

¹Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia
²Bond University, Robina, Queensland, Australia
³University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jon Billsberry, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia.
Email: j.billsberry@deakin.edu.au
University on Australia’s Gold Coast, which would have been a particularly beautiful venue had we not caught the tail of one of the worst tropical storms in Queensland’s history. The unconference was free, thanks to generous support from the Centre for Learning, Engagement, Andragogy and Pedagogy (LEAP) at Bond. To attend the unconference as a participant contributor, delegates had to submit an abstract in advance outlining the questions, issues, and concerns (QICs) they felt were most pressing with respect to research in management education. These abstracts were double-blind peer reviewed to help ensure the quality of ideas to be discussed. In the end, there were 37 participant contributors representing 15 Australian universities, 5 countries, and 4 continents at the unconference. It was a full-on, participant-driven, exciting, engaging, and overwhelmingly intense experience for one day. It was definitely different, and we are all excited to do it again.

The idea of hosting a management education conference in Australia formed in a series of discussions between Ken Brown, Editor of *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Jon Billsberry, Editor of *Journal of Management Education*, and Amy Kenworthy and George Hrivnak, associates of both journals and board members of the Bond University LEAP Centre. These discussions took place in February 2012 when Ken visited Melbourne and the Gold Coast, but it was only in November 2012 that we all decided to go for it. There is a large community of management educators in Australia and New Zealand, but few forums for them to come together without travelling halfway around the globe. It seemed important to us that we should help facilitate the development of management education research in this region.

In choosing a venue, we were keen not to situate the first conference at Deakin University, perhaps the most natural choice given Jon’s location, as this would overemphasize the role of the *Journal of Management Education*; this was genuinely a joint venture between the two journals and LEAP. Instead, Amy and George generously agreed to host the conference at Bond University. Amazingly, it only took 2 months from the decision to make it happen to the day of the actual conference. Amy and George worked incredibly hard to put it all together and this was made possible by their suggestion, which Ken and Jon enthusiastically agreed with, to make the conference an unconference.

Broadly speaking, an “unconference” is an innovative form of conference in which the participants determine the content. It is a relatively new idea, but there are multiple variants around already. We decided that because it was our first experience of the format and people might be unsure of what it is, we allocated people to one of five groups for the first session. We formed these groups based on similarities of topic in attendees’ abstracts with each group.
having a resultant discussion “prompt” to use as fodder for kick-starting discus-
sions. The five groups, clustered by topic prompt, were

- A shift toward transformational student learning processes
- Student engagement with the external world
- Cross-cultural and multicultural issues
- Challenging assumptions and the status quo
- Technology-based challenges and innovations

Each group had a facilitator, who was either an Associate Editor or Editorial Board member of one of the two journals. This was “light touch facilitation” mainly to do a round of introductions and to ask people to talk briefly about their interests. From this, discussion flowed and after an hour each group gave a 2-minute summary of their discussions and how they intended to move forward during the day in a short plenary. From there, the only predetermined events were meals, breaks, and post-unconference drinks; participants were free to use the day anyway they wished.

As the day progressed, some participants moved to different groups, some groups split and changed, some groups morphed together, and others continued on broadly as they started. This was the case with the group looking at a shift toward transformational student learning processes, which became a group discussing threshold concepts. An analysis of this group’s dynamics exposes some of the strengths of the unconference format (or lack of format). The composition of this group remained fairly unchanged during the day; one person left the group and another joined after the first session. The six members probably spent about 4 hours discussing threshold concepts and the group contained people who were well informed on the idea. It proved to be an opportunity to get to know people well and to discover subtle differences in perspective on the subject. By the end of the day, the group members were unable to form a united research agenda and instead decided to compose a portmanteau-style paper looking at the problems and opportunities that threshold concepts offer for management. It was fascinating that the conference format gave one a real sense of participants’ perspectives on a topic they know a lot about and when people found others sharing similar views, it was possible to carve out time to talk about future research collaborations. The experiences in other groups were quite different. One group committed to preparing a grant proposal; one group discussed a collaborative data collection project; one group targeted future conferences for joint submissions; one group started an e-mail discussion thread; others made no group-wide commitments at all. The flexibility of the format naturally allows for quite distinct outcomes to emerge across participants and groups.
We discussed the unconference process and outcomes several days later, and several thoughts came to mind. To begin, it is clear that the 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. Such discussions would be likely to drift with a focus more on bringing people up to speed rather than developing paths forward for creating innovative research projects. That work is best left to traditional conference formats. With the unconference, and the short one-day intensive participant-driven format we used, there really is no time to do anything besides jump straight into rich, complex, and engaging discussions.

Looking ahead, the experience and the feedback were so positive that we are thinking of running more unconferences. An annual one on the first Friday in February may work well (as does the alliteration as a mnemonic) in Australia and New Zealand, with moves already afoot to repeat the exercise in Melbourne CBD in 2014. In Europe, the summer months seem best; working collaboratively with one of our 2013 unconference participant contributors, we have now confirmed our next international RMLE Unconference will be held at the Copenhagen Business School in 2014 (specific dates and associated information forthcoming). And, of course, the format would work well in North America but as with everything organic, you will have to watch this space for more information. To keep everyone informed of our untraditional unconference (un)doings, we have set up a website, www.rmle.org, to provide more detail on past and future unconference events. Why not dare to be different and join us at one of the most engaging research-oriented events to hit our discipline in decades?

This Issue

There are four articles in this issue and between them they cover two topics: crisis management education and distance and online education. The two articles on crisis management education were submissions to our Special Issue on Crisis Management Education that appeared in our previous issue; 2013, 37(1). We were particularly fortunate to attract a large number of excellent contributions for that special issue and rather than discard perfectly publishable papers, we decided to create this annex. When deciding which articles would make the special issue and which would be allocated to this annex, creating clusters of articles that would work together well swayed us.
The fact that these two articles sit in the annex does not, in any way, make them inferior to those in the special issue; it is just a matter of limited space in a particular issue and the fact that the combination of the six articles in the special issue worked well, as does this pair.

The first article is written by Christopher Kayes, Nate Allen, and Nate Self and is titled, “Integrating Learning, Leadership, and Crisis in Management Education: Lessons From Army Officers in Iraq and Afghanistan.” The authors focus on the Battle for Takur Ghar, which took place in Afghanistan in 2002. It was a battle for a hilltop and the case is used as an exemplar for crisis leadership. In particular, the analysis of the case highlights how leaders seldom operate with simple, well-structured problems and instead have to navigate through emerging, poorly defined, and unforeseen events.

Annette Gebauer has written the second article in this crisis management annex and it is titled, “Mindful Organizing as a Paradigm to Develop Managers.” Although the article is set in people’s everyday lives, it also focuses on performance in risky, fast-paced, and unpredictable environments. Her particular interest is in “mindful organizing,” which is a proactive managerial mind-set whose purpose is to anticipate and build collective organizational capabilities for unexpected crises. The author draws on the military idea of a “staff ride.” Employed retrospectively, rides examine the underlying patterns of failure and collective negligence in an organization: What in our everyday organizing enabled the gradual emergence of errors and unexpected events? The author constructs a staff ride in management development settings through a carousel of interviews where participants have the opportunity to explore various facets of a crisis.

The third and fourth articles in this issue consider various aspects of online learning. In the first of these articles, Ben Arbaugh and Alvin Huang explore the quality of research method techniques used in management education and use best practice to perform a rigorous review of published research on online learning. They discover that in studies of online education there has been a rapid uptake of sophisticated and robust methods and analytical tools, but that there are deficiencies in the reporting of standard errors and confidence intervals in all studies and weaknesses in the reporting of exploratory factor analyses.

The second article about online learning, and the last in this issue, is by Debra Comer and Janet Lenaghan. Titled, “Enhancing Discussions in the Asynchronous Online Classroom: The Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction Does Not Lessen the Lesson,” they describe their development of “original examples” and “value-added comments” that can enrich asynchronous discussions and they offer evidence to suggest that for some students such asynchronous discussions may be more effective learning environments than face-to-face engagements.