

Unconference at an RDA Plenary - Proposal for RDA Council

Purpose

The following document proposes that we hold a half day unconference at a future RDA plenary. This proposal is motivated by

- RDA's vision to build the social and technical bridges that enable open sharing of data
- the informal but sustained community feedback that there is untapped potential within the RDA community for greater bridge building
- the authors' first hand experience and academic evidence that unconferences can facilitate greater degrees of collaboration and innovation within diverse communities like RDA
- a desire to provide an additional pathway for group formation and collaboration beyond BoFs and join sessions.

What is an Unconference?

“Unconference”, refers to a range of less structured gathering formats, from Birds of a Feather type short sessions, through to multi-day events that replace conventional conference gatherings, and various formats between these 2 extremes. Common to all formats is the difference that where traditional conferences' theme, structure, and content are all pre-arranged by an organising committee, unconferences are facilitated by organisers but the content and structure is driven by those in attendance and the event is dominated by informal rather than formal interactions.

Initially this can sound as if it would be too chaotic to be efficient, however, within academic literature and the authors' experiences there is significant evidence for how various instantiations of such events have significantly benefited communities [1–4]. To select just 2 quotes that stand out as relevant:

“Unconferences are well suited to promoting interactions and networking between attendees as they allow a more flexible agenda. Discussion topics are shaped and influenced by participants, with exchanges of knowledge from many to many.”[1]. *“Participants have claimed they can accomplish more in two days using an open-space-like model than they might after months of attacking an issue through other means.”*[2].

Conferences in domains adjacent to the RDA are looking to add unconferences to their mix. For instance, the next International Digital Curation Conference (IDCC) in Melbourne in 2019 is advertising that “A new addition to the programme will be the IDCC Unconference, to be held on the 7th of February, an event driven by delegates, on topics of their choice.”

Proposal for an unconference at Plenary 13

The following is a straw-person proposal submitted to the broader RDA leadership for consideration and discussion. In brief we propose a half day unconference, run on the afternoon of day 2 of a future plenary with the following facilitating factors.

- Extend the plenary to a full 3 days from the current norm of 2.5 days so that no meeting time is lost.
- The unconference be held on day 2 to facilitate preparation and follow up.

- The community should be prepared through (1) community polling in advance, (2) initial announcements at the preceding plenary, and (3) the introductory presentation on the morning of day 2.
- Attendees should also be presented with the unconference as an optional event wherein - if unappealing - the time slot might also be used for unstructured group work efforts for which there is often insufficient time at plenaries for, or as time to explore the location or otherwise catch up on home institution work - the need for time to maximise the value of face-to-face interaction is a constant theme. There would not be any other structured sessions in this slot.
- The morning opening session of day 2 would include a brief introduction to the unconference concept and an invitation for people to propose and vote on session topics for the afternoon in a public forum using post-it notes. During lunch a facilitating committee will arrange these proposals into preliminary sessions with identified venues and digital documentation links.
- 4hrs of the unconference afternoon:
 - 1st 30min: Introductions, prototype program is presented, last call for additional sessions and large conflicts in schedule removed, people invited to volunteer to be session facilitators and documenters.
 - Remaining 3.5hrs of 30min parallel sessions (number being venue dependant) = a minimum of 7 sessions x venue parallel allowance
- A box&/ digital location for per-session anonymous comments is important
- The following (day 3) morning session has a very brief report back (15min max): ~ here are some outcomes, blog posts coming, gdocs are publically available here
- As an example an unconference session might go as follows:
 - Facilitator and documenter selected
 - Go round the group - who's doing what/interested in what
 - Feel free to split group into multiple sub groups if that's what emerges
 - Free to get carried away and just keep going (once the session time is up you can move somewhere else to continue the discussion)
 - You're free to move if you're bored at any point in a session

What is needed to make this happen

- Extended access to meeting location for an extra .5 day of sessions to full 3 days
- Funding:
 - 1/2 day venue and staff time (TBC)
 - additional lunch/coffee break (TBC)
 - small amount for materials to support program creation (\$200 USD)
 - other? Please add!
- Volunteers for:
 - Sensitising RDA community to what an unconference is and why we want to run one at a plenary over next 6 months
 - Introducing the concept at P12 and soliciting community input on theme and volunteers to help organise
- Organisation/Facilitation committee that will be responsible for:
 - Working with the plenary local committee
 - Selecting and organising the means to be used in gathering, organising and voting on session topics (postits/slido/other)
 - Introducing the concept and goals on day1 and opening the forum for session submissions
 - Collating voted on session topics into sessions schedules with rooms
 - Encouraging volunteer note-taker and facilitators for sessions
 - Preparing gdocs/other means of sessions being documented

- Reporting back on P13 day3 and via longer reports/blog/other later

Council Decisions requested

1. Does Council support the expansion of a future plenary to include such an unconference session?
 - a. NOTE: Not clear that the plenary organisers will agree to this or that Council can make them...
2. If the answer is yes, will Council empower someone (to be identified) to take the lead and make it happen?
 - a. NOTE: This could be something TAB takes on, or we could call for volunteers at the preceding plenary. It will need someone to drive it.

References

1. Budd A, Dinkel H, Corpas M, Fuller JC, Rubinat L, Devos DP, et al. Ten simple rules for organizing an unconference. PLoS Comput Biol. 2015;11: e1003905.
2. Ingebretsen M. Unconferences Catch On with Developers. IEEE Softw. 2008;25: 108–110.
3. Foo's paradise. Nature. 2006;442: 848.
4. Cameron Craddock R, S Margulies D, Bellec P, Nolan Nichols B, Alcauter S, A Barrios F, et al. Brainhack: a collaborative workshop for the open neuroscience community. Gigascience. 2016;5: 16.