The Praxis of Belonging at Conferences

A practice guide for those who organise or support conferences to consider building belonging:
Online, hybrid, or in person

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BACKGROUND

On December 12, 2022, an international research team—comprising of academics, academic developers, professional staff, and a PhD student launched a research project exploring the experience of sense of belonging at conferences. This initiative emerged directly from the **Beyond the Obvious project.**

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rapid shift to online formats for teaching, meetings, events, and professional development across academia. In this context, our team was inspired to investigate whether the knowledge and practices developed in online education and professional spaces during that time have been meaningfully transferred into current learning environments—such as conferences.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we applied thematic analysis to the data collected and identified five key themes. As a result of this research, we developed this practice guide to offer actionable suggestions for anyone involved in organising or supporting conferences.

LITERATURE

Conferences offer a learning environment that enhances one's professional development. However, if the environment does not provoke a sense of belonging, then the learning potential can be significantly impacted. Literature addressing belonging has recognized that it affects several areas, such as:

- **One's health and resilience** (Bentrim & Henning, 2022)

- **Women's experiences** (Biggs, Hawley, & Biernat, 2018)

- **Areas of accessibility** (Walters, 2019)

- **Language** (Garcia, Arnberg, Weise, & Winborn, 2020)

- **Emotion and resistance** (Henderson, 2015)

There has been significant research about students' sense of belonging within academia (e.g., Gravett et al., 2023; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Stayhorn, 2019), but with less focus on staff as participants at conferences and how to build in belonging.

An infographic was developed from the team's literature review, that was sent to participants beforehand and used to prompt discussions during the focus groups.

Figure 1, provides an overview of key belonging dimensions from the literature review: social, economic, emotional, ethical, political, spatial, temporal, or in relation to identity or language.

How is belonging impacted by...

The Social — Who is (or is not) attending, organizing, or facilitating

Economics — Who does (or does not) have access?

Personal Identity — What role do the goals and personal attributes of participants play?

Emotion — How do participants feel before, during and after an events?

Ethics — Who belongs (and in what ways)?

Politics — What are the power relations between attendees, organizers, and facilitators?

The Spatial — What roles do physical space, geography, and culture play?

Timing — What is occurring at what time (before, during and after the event)?

Language — What is the impact of acronyms, signalling and other spoken/written language?

What did we miss?

METHODOLOGY

Participants from academic institutions and affiliated organisations who had attended conferences (online or in person) within the last seven years, were invited to take part in a mixed-methods survey to share their experiences. The survey was designed to capture demographic data, as well as factors which both fostered and hindered a sense of belonging in conference spaces.

It was developed using SurveyMonkey, and was issued across multiple listservs throughout the world, including the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education; Professional and Organisational Development; Staff and Educational Development Association, and the Canadian Educational Developer community, as well as staff networks.

The survey had 174 respondents with an invitation to participate in follow up focus groups to gain deeper understanding and insights into their experiences. Thirty-five (35) participants took part in sessions via Zoom, in groups of up to four people, with a duration of up to 60 minutes.

Semi-structured interview questions were used, focused on asking participants how they defined belonging in relation to academic conferences, exploring the differences between online and in-person experiences, and investigating whether and how individuals sought out a sense of belonging at conferences.

Considerations for Developing a Sense of Belonging at Conferences

FINDINGS

Through thematic analysis of survey and focus group data, this infographic highlights key recommendations from respondents on fostering a stronger sense of belonging at conferences. Focus group data were analysed using Saldaña's (2021) coding approach; this involved individual analysis, then paired discussion and coding.

Themes and sub-themes were then formulated by the wider research team. The five main themes developed were community, equity, power relations, intentional design and lived experience.

Belonging is Impacted by...

Community

Belonging in a community can come from sharing interests and knowledge, or feeling connection through formal or informal social opportunities.

Equity

Equitable conference plan for the needs of participants and address barriers in advance to ensure spaces and experiences where all people can belong

Power Relationships

Status, language, career phase and other hierarchies often emerge during conferences and prevent belonging, especially among newer attendees.

Intentional Design

Inclusive and acessible design through a UDL lens supports variability, fosters community and builds belonging and removes barriers

Lived Experience

Life events and past conference experiences impact how people feel, think and act - and whether they feel belonging during conferences.

COMMUNITY: VISIBLY DEFINED AND ORGANICALLY FOUND OR SOUGHT

Considerations for Building Community

Connection, either to people, place, or ideas, are important aspects of conferences to foster a sense of belonging. Community is experienced internally and externally and dependent on the individual's needs, perceptions, and amount of time in their field, and experience with conferences.

Building community means helping attendees at different career stages to have the capacity to engage in the conference. Multiple approaches to engaging need to be considered by the conference organisers and attendees. Think about the things you can do to begin establishing a welcoming and inclusive environment pre-during-and post-conference.

Actions to Implement

- **Intentional programming,** whether virtual, hybrid, or in-person, that creates opportunities for people to get to know each other, will foster a sense of a broader conference community. This encourages people to break out of familiar groups and meet new people.

- **Name badges** with identifying ribbons or stickers connecting people together as attendees, presenters, affinity with identity, language, etc.

- **Icebreakers** and activities to break down social barriers and provide opportunites to socialise.

- **An inclusive tone,** such as using inclusive language, and excitement for the event in all promotion materials, signs, and spaces for mingling.

- Provide **quite spaces** for regulation and time to reflect and unwind.

- **Create brave spaces** for critical thinking, opportunities to question, debate and seek dialogue with others.

- **Volunteers,** ways that conference volunteers and planners are visible to participants who want to find out more about the organization and/or how to participate and get involved.

- **Recognition** of everyone for their participation, such as thanking participants for attending, following up with attendees post conference to update them on upcoming events. In post-conference assessments, note changes that have been considered or made for future conferences based on conference feedback.

By implementing the above ideas, you are building community that let's participants know that their voice matters, and they are part of something bigger than the one-time event, which encourages participants to return to future events.

EQUITY: EMBEDDED AND INTEGRATED INCLUSIVITY

Considerations for Embedding Equity

This focuses on the question 'who is this conference community for ?'. Research participants highlighted the importance of equity in conference values. Equity meant that everyone could find their place in participating in the conference cognitively, emotionally, and physically.

Actions to Implement

- Financial equity to help those who need financial support to attend the conference.

- Interpreters and language assistance (e.g., live captions) to break down language barriers.

- Multiple options to save on travel, food, and lodging.

- Online conferences more affordable with a lower registration cost than a in-person conference.

- Ways to offset costs of conferences by providing opportunities for individuals to volunteer or other ways to support the conference planning and implementation.

- Recordings of the conference available for people to view post conference.

- Provide conference materials in digital accesible formats, and where required in multiple languages, with some paper formats when on campus.

- The use of Zoom and other virtual platforms that have a choice of language for the participant in closed captions.

- For in-person, plan for diverse languages and how participants can access their own language for keynotes and breakout sessions.

- Minimal use of acronyms for all participants to feel included in the dialogue and spaces of the conference.

By implementing the above ideas, you are working to provide an inclusive space for all attendees.

POWER RELATIONSHIPS: POSITIONS, CREDENTIALS, AND HIERARCHICAL COMPLEXITY

Considerations to Address Power Relationships

Power relationships can influence one's experience of a conference. Conferences can reflect how academia operates in a hierarchical way, which necessitates building a space for belonging. This important concept needs to be embedded in the organization, design, and practices that will impact all.

Leverage the playing field of power through intentional design of community spaces and connecting participants at all levels of the conference with each other.

Actions to Implement

- Making sure all, whether someone is at the conference for the first time, the individuals who have been coming for years, those who volunteer, or those who may stay on the sidelines, feel they belong. This means letting everyone know that no one receives preferential treatment regarding:

  - Time slot one is given for their presentation
  - Room assigned for presentation

- If the conference is hybrid, ensure that those online are equally included. Ways for the hierarchy of academia and privilege/power dynamics are minimized through engagement, room sizes for sessions for various presenters, table layouts for meals, recognitions and celebrations.

- Forms of mentorship that reduce perceptions of power to become sources of valuable information. For example, conference attendees who are regular attendees are paired up with new attendees – this can lead to a community of practice for future conferences, as many times, from our study, our participants stated they attended the same conferences again and again. This will create horizontal connections.

By implementing the above ideas, the aim of reducing issues of power or constructively and intentional using hierarchy to support conference attendees, will support a sense of belonging.

INTENTIONAL DESIGN: STRATEGIC HOSPITALITY AND CONTINUOUS REFLECTION

Considerations for Intentional Design

When we design for belonging, we create spaces where participants feel seen, valued, and connected to each other and to a shared purpose. This begins long before the event starts and continues well after it ends, through a culture of persistent welcoming that embraces both planners and participants.

Strategic hospitality and continuous reflection make it possible. When people feel they matter, they engage more and that's where true community thrives. Design intentionally for inclusion and accessiblity, and with purpose to build belonging.

Actions to Implement

- Inclusive and strategic design that adheres to UDL principles CAST (2024) of multiple ways of representation, engagement, and action and expression.

- Promote a conference pedagogy that fosters connection and community.

- Felten and Lambert's (2020) idea of a 'relentless welcome' - make people feel welcome throughout the whole conference. For example, include multiple opportunities for acknowledging attendees throughout the conference. Aim for some kind of recognition each day, such as acknowledging newcomers, and long-time organizational members.

- Reducing barriers to creating inclusive experiences, such as including opportunities to attend virtually or have access virtually to aspects of the conference. Reflections on the process of inclusive conference design.

By intentionally designing for belonging, a sense of belonging can be integrated into every aspect of attendee's conference experience.

LIVED EXPERIENCE: IMPACTS OF IDENTITY, PERCEPTION, AND MEMORY

Considerations from Lived Experiences

One's lived experiences influences how one feels during a conference. Past experience can impact their overall sense of belonging as positive or negative.

Further, perceptions of identity(ies) within the conference factors into an overall sense of belonging. Everyone brings their own goals and experiences that shape their experience.

Actions to Implement

- **Inclusion of food** that celebrates different cultures and addresses dietary needs (e.g. gluten-free, dairy-free, vegetarian, vegan, etc.), with the goal of increasing awareness, understanding among all participants, and celebrating the differences and ways that humanity brings everyone together. Establishing an awareness and connection to one another spills over into the discourse, insights, and learning people will experience at the conference.

- **Goals,** encouragement to engage in the conference in ways that support participant's goals.

- **Storys,** asking for participants' stories post-conference. This will acknowledge the different perspectives and honour all contributions to the conference experience.

- **Representation** of participants across all content and materials to support variability and diversity.

By implementing the above ideas, participants can draw on their past experiences and potentially alter any negative experiences from past conferences.

SENSE OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging refers to the experience when individuals feel that they are welcomed, accepted, and included members of a community.

This means having the opportunity to develop constructive relationships with colleagues, feeling supported, valued, and acknowledged as a person, maintaining connections, and to feel connected to the activities associated with the community's purpose.

Ella Deloria described the core of Belonging is to: *"Be related, somehow, to everyone you know."* Treat others as kin to forge strong bonds, trust, and respect.

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