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Attendees and Organizer Feedback Summarized

Critlib Unconference 2015 Organizers

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Critlib15 unconference feedback. After the unconference we asked the attendees and organizers to give us some feedback to 3 general questions via a Google Form. Here it is by question:

What things worked really well for you at the unconference?

Small group discussions, free coffee and snacks, coming back together for discussion at end.

The schmoozing and discussion. The discussions were great, the problem setting was great, everyone was very interested and focused and it was just wonderful. The environment was open and understanding and focused on the task at hand.

The small group discussions were amazing. The plenary was really well done, as were the freebies and the brochure.

The chance to meet others who are interested in critical pedagogy; respectful dialogue; clear organization; convenient location

i liked how it was informal, the topics we came up with, and talking with like-minded people.

The collaborative planning that happened ahead of time via the spreadsheets and emails, the registration fee being a donation as opposed to a set fee, and the open tables where people could discuss anything that interested them.

"My favorite part was the community. People were welcoming, and conversation was respectful and engaging in all the sessions I attended.

I'm super glad this group made room for conversation in person. I've never interacted with this group as a community (though I know several individuals who would consider themselves a part of it), in part because I don't love Twitter (and electronically mediated conversation in general). However, I love conversing in person! I feel like this unconference gave me hope for having (and perhaps even facilitating) deeper conversations between librarians from around the country.

I was glad the scheduling at the beginning went smoothly and quickly, and I'm glad I got to start with the theory 101 group.

The coffee was amazing!

I liked the timing right before ACRL. "

it was a great idea! supportive atmosphere, meeting people f2f that I mostly knew from twitter

Nice gathering of like-minded people from across the country.

Thank you to everyone who organized the day. I felt like, logistically speaking, things were amazingly well organized. I always knew what I was supposed to be doing next and where I was supposed to be going. From the notebooks to the coffee to the vendor neutral restrooms, it was clear that a lot of thought went into making the day a success. Many thanks to those of you who worked so hard.

the atmosphere and environment, really interesting groups of people with all sorts of ideas

"The pre-planning was very valuable. It helped move us right into the productive stuff.

Getting to meet and discuss critlib issues with others who are interested in the same things as me (we were inspired by many of the same books, authors, and thinkers in LS and education more broadly!) was so wonderful. Having the time and space to move around and have lots of conversations was helpful.

"You, the organizers, did such a great job of making me feel welcome and establishing an atmosphere where I could be my authentic self, and it seemed like that applied for others as well. A lot of us aren't great at crowds, but this didn't feel like a crowd. I noticed a stuffiness in the air at ACRL that wasn't present at our little gathering, and I think our unconference was so much the better for it.

Also, that coffee was AMAZING. Seriously. Been telling everyone back home about it."

Flexibility of coordinators/moderators

The coffee! The people! The pre-planned schedule. The donation page. The BINGO sheet. Code of conduct. Gender neutral bathrooms. The location was convenient - I could walk there from the main conference hotel. Food trucks nearby for lunch.

I really liked the lightning talks and the basic critical theory overview. It was nice to have some semi-structured things interspersed with the rest of the day.

The primer on crit theory at the beginning was nice, as was the unconference format, and the list of topics.

meeting new people, socializing with attendees

discussions. games. collegiality. it was a really lovely, open event.

"Coffee!!!

The scheduling was really quick and painless, and I felt comfortable talking in the larger groups, even though I am normally pretty quiet in group settings."

Great community! Great enthusiasm around critical librarianship. I thought the planning process worked well in terms of getting a strong set of discussion topics. And the handful of lightning talks fit perfectly into the day's events. Thank you all so much for organizing this excellent event!!!

"I think overall the conference was great! It all worked together to create a safe and collegial space for exploration & sharing.

The free coffee & tea were superlative! "

I really liked the session options, scheduling flexibility, and framing of the unconference as an immersive and changeable learning experience.

What things didn't work well for you at the conference?

Hard to hear -- sometimes the groups were too big (though all the ideas were great), and having multiple groups in one room let some big/loud groups drown out other discussions.

I wish there was more diversity. While it can be absolutely wonderful and even somewhat cathartic to finally be in a room with 100+ people who agree with you -- it also comes off as an echo chamber. In some ways it felt like we were all there to pat each other on the back and say "it's OK, we'll get through neoliberalism together." Which has its helpful purpose, but I think a greater diversity of opinions and voices could help. Plus more focus on the actionable. The Tech Manifesto was wonderful wonderful wonderful. More day-of hacks like that, helping to game plan, would be great.

I didn't like the ending discussion (maybe I was just tired?).

It seemed like a bunch of the sessions were folks just asking questions and griping about problems, rather than sharing ideas for what has worked. I know it's the opposite of critical pedagogy to be like, "here are the answers!" but it at least would have been great to have more folks who have actually had success implementing these ideas in their programs talking with those of us who are new at it. I know those folks were there...they just must have been in different sessions from me.

mostly great!

There was a "presentation" at one of the sessions I went to, which was not visible to everyone in the group. One had to follow along. In general, I think having a room with technology and presentation equipment (though I know this isn't the typical format of the unconference) would be helpful. In addition, it was difficult to hear the conversation happening in my groups at times because there were other groups in the room who were talking/laughing louder than we were. It was very distracting and made it difficult to to participate.

"I would have liked more informal conversation/reflection time between sessions, and maybe a little less at the end, though I think the longer reflection time at the end was a good idea for the first one.

The set-up of the stage/podium/computers in the big room was not ideal for fostering conversation. Also, our 101 group met in there at the same time as another group, and it was hard for group members to hear each other. (I suspect those observations won't be very relevant for the future, but I'm mentioning it just in case!)"

"I liked the idea of the lightning talks but in the end, I didn't get that much out of them. Maybe a longer format?"

in some sessions, the discussion lagged a bit...not sure what to do about this (and you did say leave if it's not working) but I was in a very small group and felt it would be rude to leave. perhaps have fewer sessions, or a min. number (and then if that number not met, that session gets canceled?)"

Lots of posing problems but no real solutions or suggestions to take back to my library. Raising awareness is a good thing but concrete next steps would be helpful to build from. I wish lightning talks were at the beginning to set the stage for some issues to discuss in small groups.

I wish there had been just a little bit longer of a break at lunch. My pre-lunch session ran a little long and it took a while to walk down to the food trucks, get food, and come back.

there was one time when it wasn't clear who was taking notes, who was facilitating, etc. Not sure what happened there, but it was a huge group, so kind of unwieldy

"The lightning talks were interesting, but felt a little disjointed from the rest of the day.

There were a few times where I felt like we lost sight of the "critical" component of critlib. Not sure why that was? But at times I felt like we wandered into general discussions of librarianship and related issues (budgets, staffing, working with the Framework) without getting into discussions of "here are some systemic reasons for why that is..." I don't mean to say these discussions weren't still invaluable to me, so maybe it's silly to lump this into the "things that didn't work" box, but I'm curious to know if others felt the same way?

Nothing coming to mind....

"Home made snacks. Labeling was sporadic and not much was vegan (not sure about other dietary issues). And there were a lot of cookies for breakfast...

Volunteering to set up and break down. Maybe I wasn't proactive enough or maybe you had all the help you needed, but I failed to find people to give me tasks. "

I had a really hard time hearing in the larger groups.

That was a very very very white group, and for people who subscribe to critical theories... we have some soul searching to do.

I thought that the wrap-up comments about a "safe space" were actually a bit coercive. I didn't feel safe throughout the day, but didn't feel safe saying that either. A lot of the language of critical theory can be used as a way to set up an insider/outsider dynamic.

the schedule was great to have ahead of time, though the in-advance preparation made it much less spontaneous than previous unconferences that i've attended. having sticker voting or getting groups to set the agenda that day all at once is chaotic--and exhilarating--and democratic and participatory.

"When presenters weren't mic'ed in the main room, it was really difficult to hear.

The sessions I attended were way to big to be able to really talk on a deeper level. Also, no one in attendance had actually proposed the session; we had volunteer moderators, but even between the moderators there were occasional disagreements about what we were even talking about. Sometimes,

the group would just hang out for like 10 or 15 minutes chatting before one someone would step up and say, ""hey, we should probably get started.""

The lightning talks felt rushed -- having a bit more time for those would have been nice."

Conversations seemed to keep drifting away from critical theory or social justice informed approaches to practice. In my observations, many (of the most vocal participants) were more comfortable critiquing the usability or functionality of online resources. There was probably 20 minutes or so of each session that felt like we were not tackling the stated goals of the conference: contesting capitalist, patriarchal, and racist power structures in libraries.

"I think that in some of the sessions the discussion would drift from a critical focus to a more general focus (this doesn't just happen here but in most conferences - ACRL is a good example!) We'd start talking about critical instruction and then all of a sudden we were just talking about regular instruction issues. One way that might mitigate this is to have the topics a bit more focused from the get-go. Have a topic with 3- 5 subsidiary points/questions listed, all of which help to bring the topic back to the critical focus. So instead of just a general topic like ""critical library instruction"", have something like:

Critical library instruction

- * What kinds of content makes a session critical?
- * What kinds of pedagogical methods make a session critical?.
- * How to get critical in the 50 minute one-shot.

I think having this kind of specificity would help the facilitator (and others) feel better about occasionally asking ""So how does that point relate to one of the questions above?"" And if the current facilitator of the discussion didn't seem to do this, one of the organizers of the conference might feel empowered to help lead the group back.

It was a little challenging to have several sessions happening simultaneously in the big room. Could be hard to hear/interact.

What would you like to see at the next critlib Unconference?

Big group 101 session at beginning to get everyone on the same page with critical theory... It was hard to attend the small session because it was concurrent with all the other excellent sessions

"Maybe ideas and planning toward organizing work and actively moving these ideas into practice. I know we talk a lot about ""how do we actually do this,"" but I've found those conversations are often not very fruitful. Something like the tech manifesto is a project that an unconference could sketch out and work on. I would like to see some of that for other fields -- IL, scholarly communication, etc.

Also, it would be GREAT to have more voices from outside of libraries that are relevant to library life. Administrators, student life, politicians, users of services even. A lot of these issues can not be solved by librarians working alone no matter how great the ideas are. The unconference could be a good way to interdisciplinary that shit up."

Invited keynote speaker? A screen that runs the twitter feed for the conference? A competition similar to Battledecks - but different and more awesome?

"Maybe a kind of report back at the end of the day to give an overview of the main issues/solutions that came up in each breakout session? Also I think it would've been great for all of us to get the Critical Theory 101 session. It also would've been nice to take a few minutes to reflect on the day silently and create an action plan for returning to our institutions.

And a follow up on the critical tech manifesto!"

i'd like to see one before the conference and one after, so we can process.

I'd like to see smaller groups and possibly repeats of the same topics so that there is more than one option and more meaningful discussion. It's hard for people to speak up in giant groups, I think.

"I'm from the 101 cohort, but I think it would be interesting to do more with particular theories and ideas, exploring their varied impact(s) on teaching and librarian practice.

Teaching is the main focus of my work, and I feel like I have a good sense of the political forces at work in that context. But I feel like a great deal of neoliberal power in libraries is negotiated through collections. I'm part of a large institution where I don't have much individual power to influence things like contract negotiations with publishers and aggregators, and I'm interested in how I might better support resistance work in that context, even within my own institution."

maybe one or two substantive talks (invited speakers?)

A mix of formal and unformal presentations. Perhaps a keynote speaker. I know this sounds like a regular conference but I felt there was not a framework to build my knowledge from or be inspired. Need more takeaways to help build capacity in my own library not just with myself.

More technical services-related session. I realize that the planners have no control over this, though, given that unconference attendees propose and choose topics.

more! more good discussion, etc.

More of the same.

"As was mentioned during the unconference wrap-up, we need to figure out a way to welcome more people of color. I know that this was a theme throughout ACRL and the larger discussions of diversity in the profession, but it seems to me that critlib has already taken the step of acknowledging the white supremacist nature of librarianship. Time to put theory into action, right? #praxis

I'd also like to see more grad students, non-academic librarians, and, especially, administrators. So many of our discussions ended at ""But my boss won't let me."" I think we need some bosses in the room to see if that's really the case."

More of the same!

It would be great to have a social event where everyone could just get to know each other and make connections. It was great to share space with so many folks who are working toward similar goals.

More diversity.

more concrete actionable results to come out of the day.

some open session voting. outdoor games. perhaps affinity groups.

"Coffee!!

Smaller groups. If there are larger sessions, having one or two people sign up to moderate ahead of time (even if it is just to do time checks) would be nice.

More time for lightning talks."

I'd like to see some mechanism for keeping conversations on critical topics. Maybe short (10 min) presentations at the start of each conversation, setting the direction for the conversation. Or, a set of questions that each discussion group will generate and try to stick to.

Beer. And maybe an after go out for dinner, or other outings to critical places nearby. To extend the conference.

A big theme that emerged for me at this unconference was around unrecognized/uncompensated labor running rampant in our profession. I'd like to see us talk about how to support and learn one another and organize around this issue.