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Enlarging conference learning:

At the crossroads of Fat Studies and Conference Pedagogies

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Abstract

This article stages an encounter between the field of fat studies and conference pedagogy scholarship. After laying the foundations for a reading of academic conferences as learning spaces, we present two examples - International Fat Studies Conferences held in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2012 and 2016 - in order to unpack these ideas. Our framing of fat studies conferences as pedagogical spaces sparks questions that travel in multiple directions. It calls us to consider possible modifications to the design of fat studies conferences, as well as how discussions about fat pedagogy may have a wider application to academic gatherings.

Keywords: academic conferences; conference pedagogy; higher education; fat studies.

Introduction: Learning and (Fat Studies) Conferences

The field of fat studies offers researchers a myriad of tools to interrogate and disturb norms surrounding embodiment, teaching, learning, and knowledge production (Cameron & Russell, 2016; Pausé, Wykes & Murray, 2014). While a growing body of literature deploys a fat studies approach to the analysis of formal education (e.g. Burford, 2015; Cameron & Russell, 2016) and public pedagogies (Rich, 2016), conferences remain an under-considered domain in fat studies (for an exception see: Francombe-Webb, Rich, & De Pian, 2014). This absence of engagement could be interpreted as resulting from fat studies' status as an emerging field, yet we suspect that it also has something to do with the widespread ambivalence surrounding academic conferences across the disciplines. For many people conferences are little more than the delivery of an educational service to academic customer-participants (Hoyt & Whyte, 2011), and are therefore not seen to hold much educational promise. This article begins with an alternative proposition. We view academic conferences as complex, contested, and interesting spaces where teaching and learning may occur, not least because the connections that drew the three authors of this paper together were established at conferences.

We begin with the broad proposition that conferences are a form of public pedagogy (Hickey-Moody, Savage & Windle, 2010; Sandlin, O'Malley & Burdick, 2011). We view conferences in this way because they are *institutionalized* sites of learning in the sense that they have been “consciously created with pedagogical ends in mind” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 384), yet they occur beyond the realm of formal schooling. In so doing, we connect our work with a broader series of debates about public and

cultural pedagogies (Hickey-Moody et al., 2010), as well as more specific conversations that have considered conference pedagogy from the perspectives of critical race studies (Srivastava, 1997), queer studies (Burford & Henderson, 2015), feminist studies (Bell, 1987; Henderson, 2015; Saul, 1992), and learning science (Ravn, 2007). Discerning fat studies conferences as pedagogical spaces - that is, both “mental and physical spaces where the potential for learning exists” (Hansen, 2010, p. 77) - sparks questions that travel in multiple directions. It calls us to consider what “conference learning” might be, and the kinds of pedagogical spaces conferences tend to create. It also asks questions about which alternative and experimental forms of conference pedagogy are currently available. In particular, the debate we are instigating allows us to consider possible modifications to the design of future fat studies conferences, and how research on fat pedagogy - the project of “reimagining an experience of education that is inclusive of size diversity” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2) - offers insights to the broader field of academic conference management and design. As other scholars have noted, conferences inevitably bring academic bodies and identities into contact, which raises political questions of privilege and disadvantage (Francombe-Webb et al., 2014). It is our hunch that the fat studies project of paying attention to the ways:

classrooms and other learning contexts can turn bodies into political sites of privilege and oppression as well as the ways in which dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression ... are being addressed within spaces and places of teaching and learning (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2)

may be usefully extended to reconsider research conferences. In order to address both of these concerns we present illustrations from two International Fat studies Conferences

held in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2012 and 2016. Reflections from the conference chair for these events are explored in order to understand the theories that shaped the conference design, as well as the innovations and limitations of the events.

(Fat studies) conferences and the question of ‘pedagogy’

Before introducing the conferences, we need to turn to the question of why conferences in general - and fat studies conferences in particular - can usefully be considered as pedagogical spaces. Conferences are an important and longstanding, yet under-researched part of academic life (Henderson, 2015). Key topics considered by conference researchers include the economic impacts of conferences (Grado, Strauss & Lord, 1997), and the logistical dimensions of conference planning and delivery (Mundry, Britton, Raizen & Loucks-Horsely, 2000). While there has long been a focus on measuring conference “satisfaction,” less has been published on the possibilities conferences afford to learning. It is the aim of this section, and the article overall, to think about (fat studies) conferences as pedagogical spaces. Despite the fact that exploring learning at conferences remains under-researched, there have been recent attempts to think about how knowledge and practices learned at conferences might be transferred (or not) into outside contexts (Andersen & Wahlgren, 2015), or to re-frame conferences as temporary learning communities (Adlam, 2014). This article brings critical scholarship on conferences together with the political aims of fat studies to consider what fat studies conference pedagogy could look like.

Why do fat studies scholars and activists attend conferences? Those in attendance most likely have similar motivations as scholars and activists in other fields, such as: the chance to network, to learn about new developments in the field, and the opportunity to

share their work with colleagues (Hickson III, 2006). An added motivation for those in marginalized fields - like fat studies - is to connect with people who understand the shared purpose they hold (Krishna, 2007). In the excerpt below, the Australian fat activist Kath Read reflects on her experience at one of the fat studies conferences discussed later in this article:

But most of all, what I valued the most was the community. This was a room full of people whom I did not have to educate from scratch. This is almost unheard of for me... We spoke a common language, and are approaching the topic from a similar direction (2016, para 5).

As Read identifies, the opportunity to come together and speak to members of an established community of practice was a desirable feature of the fat studies conference she attended. Yet in this article we argue that curiosity about conferences must also include *how* information is shared, and by which methods learning might be expected to occur. As Hatcher, Wiessner, Storberg-Walker and Chapman (2006) argue, these latter questions tend to be under-considered by organizers of research conferences in general, where the focus remains on providing space to “share and report information” (p. 1), rather than to necessarily curate the kind of critical learning environments that fat studies aspires to create. That being said, some writers have established that learning can be an intended feature of conferences from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Coryell & Murray, 2014). If conferences might be events where learning is expected to happen, there is a need to explore what kinds of learning environments they really create.

Theoretical approaches to pedagogy

A detailed consideration of debates in the field of pedagogy remains beyond the scope of this article. It is our hope in this section to gesture to some lines of thought that may be valuable for thinking about pedagogy and conferences together. The traditional pedagogical model of the conference is underpinned by what Paulo Freire (1972) called a banking theory of learning. Often conference “teaching” tends to be imagined as a relatively simple transfer of information from an expert knower to a receptive audience who is expected to listen quietly until the speaker concludes their talk. This traditional conference pedagogy may be characterized by one-way communication via lecture, a focus on content rather than modes of instruction, a preference for information over practice, and a limited connection to the use or application of knowledge. Often conferences fail to offer opportunities for sharing, “leaving only minutes to identify implications for theory, research and practice... with... no meaningful social dialogue” (Graham & Kormanic, 2004, p. 391-2). Homing in on fat studies conferences encourages us to ask how fat studies pedagogy, much of which has been developed for a classroom environment, might translate to the conference space.

Just as fat pedagogy has sought to re-vision classroom learning, there is a tradition of querying conference norms that can be traced through feminist scholarship (e.g. Bell, 1987) and developments in adult learning theories (Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005). These critical approaches to conference organizing share a mutual aim of increasing reflection and participant involvement and interaction, whether to deconstruct patriarchal norms or drive learning (Ravn & Elsborg, 2007). These insights suggest a number of design principles for conference learning. While the formal learning environment of “individual keynote sessions, breakouts, seminars, and workshops” (Hilliard, 2006, p. 53) may

remain important, it is valuable to consider other features, including the length of presentations, the ability to engage in active interpretation, opportunities for participants to discuss what brought them to the conference, and the ability to network and share knowledge (Ravn & Elsborg, 2007). At a practical level, some examples of interventions into conference pedagogy include talk formats such as Pecha Kucha, where 20 slides are each shown for 20 seconds (Klein & Dytham, 2017). They also include participatory techniques such as Open Space Technology (OST), where participants self-organize based on their own agendas (Owen, 1997), and The World Cafe model which draws on a conversational process structured around defined questions (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Other conference organizers have designed particular learning facilitation technologies such as break-out sessions, shared reflection “trading zones” (Grant, Burford, Bosanquet, & Loads, 2014), or “buzz dyads” where people are invited to talk to their neighbors (Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

Building on this section’s argument that (fat studies) conferences can and should be researched as learning spaces, we now move on to address the specific conferences that form the basis of this article. In the section that follows we consider the ways in which opportunities were created for both opening up, and also closing down, teaching and learning about fat embodiment and identities at the 2012 and 2016 Fat Studies New Zealand conferences.

Fat pedagogies and fat conferences: FSNZ12 and FSNZ16

This section outlines the two conferences we selected for analysis: FSNZ12 (Fat Studies New Zealand ’12) and FSNZ16 (Fat Studies New Zealand ’16). It is our goal in

this section to unpack what happened at each conference in order to reflect on what a “pedagogical” lens might bring into focus.

FSNZ12 was hosted at Massey University’s Wellington campus from 12-13 July 2012. The conference attracted thirty participants, with delegates attending from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. The conference theme was *Reflective Intersections*, which invited delegates to reflect on how fat studies intersects with participants’ home disciplines as well as how fat oppression intersects with other categories of social marginalisation (Pausé, 2014). The first day began with a 15 minute welcome and mihi (a Māori practice of greeting and introduction). This was followed by a series of panels, individual papers, and film screenings across both days of the conference.

FSNZ16 was also hosted in New Zealand, at Massey University’s Palmerston North campus from 29-30 June 2016. Forty delegates from New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, and Finland attended. Additionally, five presenters joined the conference remotely. The theme in 2016 was *Identity, Agency, Embodiment*; FSNZ16 involved more sole paper presentations and did not screen films as was the case in 2012.

The number of delegates and their joint interest in fat studies enabled participants to be kept together across the programs of both conferences. In both 2012 and 2016 there was a single stream of offerings, and both conference and informal meals were often taken together. Creating such a space, which could hold delegates together, allowed for the further building of a community of interdisciplinary fat studies scholars. Spending two days together set these conferences apart from larger conferences that may offer a fat studies track or stream, such as the Popular Culture Association, for example.

Innovations and lessons learned from FSNZ12 and FSNZ16

Our goal in the sections that follow is to reflect on FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 as learning spaces, taking a particular focus on where innovations were noted or lessons could be learned. The process for generating these reflections involved the third author writing an account of her experience of chairing FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 and sharing this with the first and second authors, who responded with questions and sought clarifications. Following this process of reflection on the conferences and in conjunction with reading across scholarly literature in the field, the authors grouped lessons learned into four main areas: 1) conference pedagogy; 2) employment of fat pedagogical tools; 3) accessibility and intersectionality; and 4) community engagement.

Conference pedagogy. In organizing both conferences, admittedly limited consideration was given to their design as learning spaces per se. The working practice of the organizers was to replicate models of conferences past. Like most research conferences, the focus of the committee was more on “what” would be presented and “who” would present it than “how” learning might occur. As a result of this framing, organizers grouped speakers loosely into streams, with each speaker given 15 minutes to present, and 5 minutes for questions at the end of their talk (the keynotes had considerably more time for both).

Yet the conferences did offer some pedagogical innovations. For example, during FSNZ16, efforts were made to create spaces of meaningful social dialogue (Graham & Kormanic, 2004; Ravn & Elsborg, 2007). During the first morning the conference chair invited attendees to introduce themselves, share reasons for attending, and goals for the conference. A similar opportunity was offered at the end, where the chair invited

delegates to reflect on their experience and share concluding thoughts, feelings, and questions. Looking forward to planning for FSNZ20, Pausé intends for ‘pedagogy’ to be a standing agenda item for the conference committee. A learning lens will be applied to the conference to experiment with changes. This will include consideration of who gets to speak, for how long, the nature of engagements between participants, and how spaces for active learning may be facilitated. The post-conference evaluations will include questions about the features of the conference that helped delegates to learn.

Employing fat pedagogical tools. At the heart of fat pedagogy is an effort to normalize fat bodies, and consider the lived experiences of fat people in educational contexts (Pausé, 2016). Fat pedagogical scholarship has drawn attention to the need for learning spaces to be safe for people of all sizes, demonstrated through the language used, the visuals presented, and the physical accessibility of the space. At FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 the organizing team was attentive to each of these concerns, for example by thinking carefully about the diversity of images used in conference and promotional materials. Another important part of creating safe spaces for people of all sizes was to ensure the physical accessibility of the spaces. This meant considering whether the conference venue was accessible, if the furniture was comfortable for large bodies, and if the arrangement of furniture allowed for fat bodies to move through spaces unencumbered (Hetrick & Attig, 2009). Other spaces were not forgotten. For example, meal spaces, bathrooms, and social spaces offsite were scrutinized for their accessibility for participants across all of these intersecting concerns.

In addition to considering these physical features of the conference environment, it is our proposition that both conferences enacted pedagogical practices that have been

observed in previous work on fat pedagogies, such as framing, layering and connecting (Cameron, 2015). At FSNZ16, for example, a poster from Nalgona Positive Pride was displayed by the front door. This poster, entitled “You are in a body-positive zone,” requested that individuals refrain from engaging in, among other things, diet/weight talk, food shaming, and health/concern trolling. Following Cameron (2015), the use of tools like this poster might be understood as a form of “framing,” which attunes delegates to the expected atmosphere, boundaries and objectives of the learning space. The organizers of the event also employed a pedagogical practice of “layering” (Cameron, 2015), in particular by offering strategic keynotes at the beginning of the conference which sought to “provide intentional guidance with regards to language, information, and [...] activities that support [...] (un)learning of dominant ‘obesity’ discourse” (p. 34). This practice acknowledged the diverse starting points of participants, and allowed delegates to be eased into the more challenging content that would be presented later in the conference. Keynotes were also used to employ another pedagogical tool of “connecting” (ibid.). The keynotes for FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 were selected because they were able to present different lenses and accounts of understanding fatness. The organizing team felt that a combination of activist and academic keynotes would be pedagogically useful, as it would allow for different stories and practices to be presented.

Accessibility and intersectionality. Across FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 the conference organizing committee was mindful of accessibility and intersectionality. These concerns are relevant to conference pedagogies because they demarcate who can access conferences and learn in these spaces. The Call For Papers (CFP) invited “academics, researchers, intellectuals, scholars, activists, and artists, in any field of study, and at any

stage in their career” to present and attend the conference, and was shared in spaces where both academics and activists might see it. The registration costs for the conference were stratified, and scholarships could be arranged for prospective delegates who found the cost prohibitive. After FSNZ12, it was clear that cost and travel did prevent attendance. To address this, the organizers provided a live stream of FSNZ16 for those unable to attend in person, as well as live tweeting, and questions for presenters via Tweets; this learning technology enabled individuals to attend as online delegates. This innovation ensured that those unable to join in person, perhaps due to familial commitments, the cost of travelling to New Zealand, or the physical ability to do so, were able to contribute to the knowledge we were building in the space; this is one of the strengths of sociable scholarship (Pausé & Russell, 2016). In 2016, scholarship and grassroots activism were acknowledged by inviting two keynotes; one fat studies academic and one fat activist. These choices are pedagogical in the sense that they “teach” us about the values that fat studies holds as a community of practice. The greatest failure of both FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 was its reproduction of whiteness in the academy. The conference suffered from an inability to engage people of color (POC), as either speakers or attendees. Steps were taken in FSNZ16 to address this, by including POC serving on the conference committee and paying extra attention to ensure that the CFP was shared with networks facilitated by people of color, especially indigenous communities in New Zealand. The end result was largely the same, though, with mostly white delegates (including two white keynotes), although there were more POC in attendance than at FSNZ12. For FSNZ20, additional steps will be taken to promote fat

scholars who work and live at the intersections of racial and fat oppressions, including by inviting POC to keynote at the event.

Community engagement. During FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 the organizers made the most of community engagement opportunities that allowed for a variety of learning spaces across the conference. In FSNZ16 this included events held at the local library and museum. These included a spoken word event, *Fat Out Loud*. This event unofficially kicked off the conference, and allowed for delegates to get to know one another personally in a casual space before nametags were brought out and programs were distributed. The conference was capped off with the opening of The Adipostivity Project exhibit; a photoactivist project that highlights, and dare we say celebrates, fat bodies. Farrell (2016) suggests that empathic interpretation is a powerful tool of fat pedagogy; inviting delegates to engage with both stories and positive images of fat people promoted “critical and self-reflexive empathy” (p. 65). These events were open to the public, ensuring that the opportunities presented by bringing this learning community together were not limited to only those attending the conference.

Conclusion

This article has argued that conferences in general - and fat studies conferences in particular - can be understood as pedagogical spaces where learning may occur. Such a framing has prompted questions about what the field of fat studies can learn from critical work on conferences that attends to learning. It has also allowed us to think about the innovations enacted and lessons learned at FSNZ12 and FSNZ16, which can inform future conference organizers in fat studies and beyond. The key areas of FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 we have singled out are: conference pedagogy, fat pedagogies, accessibility and

intersectionality, and community engagement. We hope future conference organizers might draw on these reflections to think about, for example, the value of creating opportunities for delegates to introduce themselves and share goals for their time together, or how to create more inclusive environments for delegates of diverse body sizes. As we see it, fat pedagogies scholarship asks conference organizers to interrogate what kinds of bodies they think belong at conferences, and offers resources to create conferences that are more accessible. Applying a fat pedagogies lens to FSNZ12 and FSNZ16 has highlighted the role that these conferences have had in the development of a new and innovative research field. Our critical evaluation of the successes and limitations of the learning environments that were created also teaches us what the field of fat studies is actually about. We hope this article has offered readers helpful material for further contemplation, experimentation, and debate.

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