An A-Z of Socially Just Conference Organizing in Health, Physical Education, and Sport Pedagogy

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An A-Z of Socially Just Conference Organizing in Health, Physical Education, and Sport Pedagogy

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Professional development is a cornerstone for scholars in health, physical education, and sport pedagogy. Professional development allows scholars to stay up to date with research (De Picker, 2020) in terms of pedagogy, policy, theory, and educational changes in their discipline. Professional development ensures scholars remain knowledgeable, effective, and responsive to the needs of their students and the broader educational community. By engaging in professional development, scholars model the importance of lifelong learning to their students (Ward & van der Mars, 2020). This practice not only enhances their expertise but also inspires the students themselves to pursue continuous learning and self-improvement.

For academics, conferences serve as vital venues for networking, knowledge exchange, and the sharing of ideas for professional development. They often mark the genesis of numerous academic papers and the culmination of completed scholarly works. However, the privilege of attending, participating in, and presenting at conferences is typically reserved for scholars affiliated with well-funded universities or those who have secured research grants. Many academics are never afforded the opportunity to engage in these essential professional development activities, especially if they are international, often bearing the costs themselves if they choose to attend. Consequently, conference attendance is an academic privilege predominantly available to those in advantaged institutions or regions. Local conferences may be more accessible for scholars with limited financial resources, but national and international conferences often remain out of reach. This disparity can significantly impact the academic contributions, professional standing, and promotion opportunities of scholars within the field (Henderson & Burford, 2020).

Conferences can sometimes be exclusive (De Picker, 2020), forming cliques among regular attendees and alienating newcomers. This is just one of the exclusionary practices within the field. While this practice is rarely the intention of conference organizers and delegates, the discipline lacks a straightforward guide to organizing conferences from a socially just perspective. This article uses a social justice lens to assist conference organizers in creating a more inclusive and equitable conference.

Social justice entails living in an equitable and liberating society where individuals experience justice and are socially aware of sociocultural issues, taking action to address them (Lynch et al., 2022). The following information provides an A-Z guide for conference organizers, to initiate conversations with conference committees about overlooked aspects of inclusion and equity. Although not exhaustive—no social justice list can be, as they evolve with people and language—this guide offers a starting point for those committed to fostering professional development and social justice within academic conferences in the hope of shaping academic culture.

A—Attract Diverse Perspectives, People, and Languages

One way to attract diverse people, across class, age, gender, race, heritage, and sexual orientation is to have more than one platform for the conference. Multiple platforms can embrace the needs of different classes, ages, genders, races, heritage, sexual orientations, and so on (Barrows et al., 2021). Consequently, when marketing the

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conference, two main factors should be taken into consideration: *platform* and *language*. The platform sharing the conference should be a mixture of online and offline methods. Not everyone will see the conference advertised through a website or social media. Promotion through national and local organizations can help, and encouraging word-of-mouth recommendations is invaluable. Digital platforms for promotion include LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, conference mailing lists, and special interest group mailing lists. Ensure that a variety of languages are shared within the marketing materials; if the conference is English-speaking, you can share that information within the materials. "For active participation in any conference, access to information is vital" (Callus, 2017, p. 1662) even in terms of where and when the conference is.

Language can often be a barrier to attending a conference purely from a conference abstract perspective and acceptance to present, but language also limits discussions and contributions during the conference. Many conferences privilege English, whereas non-native English speakers face additional barriers. Joo et al. (2022) suggest allowing individuals to write abstract proposals in their preferred language and having an abstract reviewer who can review in that language or a list of acceptable languages.

Students and academics should attend conferences, not just academics. Conferences provide students with opportunities to network, learn, and enhance their educational experience. Experienced scholars have a role to play at the conference. They have an ethical and professional responsibility to introduce young scholars and scholars from countries previously not attending the conference to colleagues in the field, thereby bridging the gap between scholarly standing and networking. Moreover, conferences that offer a free student place with every academic could provide the opportunity of a lifetime for individuals.

B—Buildings

Ensure the buildings are accessible and use inclusive design principles from the beginning of organizing the conference (Barrows et al., 2021). *Inclusive design* principles create inclusive and accessible environments and services that benefit everyone, regardless of their abilities. Accommodations such as working and functional elevators and ramps for entrances into buildings are good for a wide range of individuals' abilities, especially for those with disabilities. Another example includes ensuring all conference talks are in one place to avoid delegates getting lost and being late to sessions — this approach ensures that the size and space of the conference is simple and intuitive, helping all attendees to navigate around the conference venue. Within buildings, during keynote speeches, speakers are often placed on an elevated podium, creating a hierarchy between attendees and the speaker rather than creating a community of caring, relational knowledge production, and a sense of belonging (Black et al., 2020). Podiums also pose an accessibility issue (Irish, 2020) because they are a potential trip hazard for the speaker; thus, elevated podiums are not advised or deemed necessary. If having everyone in one location cannot be helped, which is often the case if needing sports specialist facilities for practical sessions, ensure you have a building map for attendees.

C—Culturally Appropriate Celebrations and Performances

Dancers, singers, and performances of a creative nature can be very special, especially at a health and physical education conference;

however, these performances must not be tokenistic or perpetuate culturally inappropriate traditions. As an example, just putting on Bhangra dancing at a British conference without a conversation about the cultural traditions of the local area would be inappropriate and could constitute cultural appropriation when homogenous audiences outside of the culture are requested to stand up and perform moves. It is crucial to be culturally sensitive to the traditions of the local community. Land acknowledgments should always be shared, but never in a tokenistic manner that is disingenuous to Indigenous people or other cultural groups.

D—Delegate Code of Conduct

A short, to-the-point, delegate code of conduct can be helpful and protect delegates at the conference. A code of conduct can set the tone for a conference about appropriate and acceptable norms the committee and organization want to have (Sardelis et al., 2017). For example, can photos be taken of presentations? Can you enter a room and then leave it to go somewhere else? What etiquette should there be around the conference? Is it explicitly stated that there is zero tolerance for racism, harassment, misogyny, sexism, ableism, and other such conduct? The code of conduct should also explicitly state the outcome for zero-tolerance behaviors and actions. Barrows et al. (2021) suggest expulsion from the conference and potentially from the organization. The code of conduct can easily be signed at the registration phase of the conference.

E—Environmental Justice

The location of conferences is central to environmental justice. Whereas international and national conferences can involve carbon emissions from both audio and visual equipment and the likely use of plastics, the biggest contributor must be air travel. Aircraft engines burn jet fuel to generate thrust for flight. During combustion, carbon dioxide, water vapor, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, and particulate matter (which is everything else in the air that is not gas) are released into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas emitted from aircraft engines directly influencing climate change and global warming. Business travel emissions are a large contributor to the current climate emergency.

To reduce air travel, there are two main solutions: hosting online/virtual conferences and hosting multiple hub sites (*multi-hub sites*) in different regions. Online/virtual conferences have been suggested by Black et al. (2020, p. 123) because they can reduce barriers to conference participation such as "caring roles, part-time studies, casual contracts, and time[-] and resource-poor situations." Removing the need to fly means business travel emissions are eradicated, but also tangible barriers to conference attendance are reduced. Secondly, Parncutt et al. (2021) have suggested that conference organizers re-evaluate whether multi-hub sites for conferences could exist in some way. *Multi-hub sites* integrate hybrid conferencing models, featuring localized speeches and keynote addresses alongside shared or live-streamed videos/

recordings from other hubs that are part of the same conference, significantly reducing both travel time and environmental impact. It is a collective responsibility to look after the planet. Conference organizers coming up with solutions that suit an international audience will always be challenging, but at least the provision of multi-hub sites provides an opportunity for some face-to-face engagement with some virtual content opportunities. Another benefit is the decreased cost of air travel, thereby mitigating economic impacts. Parncutt et al. (2021) give additional suggestions on the topic of hub locations that might be helpful to readers.

For European conferences, reducing the need for flying can be achieved by selecting a host country that is well-connected by accessible train lines to multiple other countries. This approach not only minimizes environmental impact but also enhances convenience for attendees. For remote conference locations within parts of the United States and Canada, the remote aspect can seem idyllic; however, access and travel time can pose significant challenges.

When considering the environment, the location of where the conference is held should be central to the organizational discussion considering the land in which the conference is and whether the land is one of democratic values, free from political unrest, crime, dated laws (considering LGBTQI travelers), and extreme weather and natural disasters. Because crime can occur anywhere, participants should be mindful that tourists and conference participants can experience criminal behaviors directed at their belongings. Thus, thought should be given to which lands attendants choose to visit for conferences.

F—Food Options

Catering for the few means that the masses become part of the solution. Eating plant-based is more sustainable for our planet. The most sensible and inclusive option is to cater to everyone with plant-based, gluten-free, and nut-free options. Although this option might be more expensive, it means that a wide number of dietary requirements are catered for, and no one feels left out in the lunch queue. For example (generally), vegans, vegetarians, and meat eaters can all eat plant-based foods. Not only does this approach look after our environment, reducing environmental damage from rearing animals and increasing greenhouse gases, but it also prevents catering teams from preparing several alternatives of food and food mixing. At a recent conference the food labels were mixed up, which could have been detrimental and life-threatening for the wrong individual. Promotional materials around the food court regarding food waste can also be helpful, reminding attendees to go back for more instead of overfilling their plates!

G—Gratitude and Gift Bags

It is important to show appreciation for attending the conference, but often showering attendees with "goodie bags" can seem unnecessary and comes at an increased cost. Can costs be reduced without them? Or can gift bags provide an important avenue for sharing knowledge, perhaps of the local traditions and cultures of the conference location? Instead of filling bags with promotional materials for sponsors, which increases printing costs and uses more trees, consider using this opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the local area. This approach could involve initiatives that give back to the environment and support the community of the host location.

H—Helpline for Emergencies

When visiting an international country, visitors can feel helpless if an emergency strikes or something happens outside of the conference day hours. Having an emergency contact or safety officer can be helpful (Sardelis et al., 2017) in case something happens when an attendee cannot call emergency services but wants advice, or when they do not know the best contact for emergency services. It might also be advantageous for the emergency helpline to contact emergency services to explain the situation in the native language. Conferences do have an ethical obligation to safeguard their attendees while visiting the conference. Although they cannot be held responsible for situations outside of the conference, a helpful, friendly, and supportive organizer will always try and help.

I—Invest in Presenters and Children

Invited colleagues presenting and speaking should not be left with out-of-pocket expenses by presenting at the conference. Asking presenters to pay and spend for themselves presents enormous challenges for people in many different financial situations and is not recommended. Conference organizers should use their budgets to support the payment of speakers and costs *upfront*. While many conference organizers are beginning little start-up funds, the organization should loan conference organizers a certain amount and then be reimbursed by conference registration fees. It is a great risk if organizations have a bank of cash to lend but conference organizers are funding the conference from their pocket; they cannot host if they have no startup funds. As an additional investment, keynote presenters should also have a brief on the conference's aims, purpose, and scope so that they can align their talk to their audience.

Children and young people are at the heart of our concerns and advocacy in health, physical education, and sport pedagogy. However, it is important to recognize that while children are involved in the opening ceremonies of conferences, their participation tends to be tokenistic, and they are absent from the rest of the event. It seems disingenuous for a discipline that champions children not to feature them prominently throughout the conference program. Each conference should include panels featuring children and young people, not only to present ideas and receive feedback but also to trial suggested pedagogies. For example, if a session focuses on engaging with student voice, a group of students could participate in a modified student-designed games curriculum. This approach would allow educators to observe the skills students develop and the delivery of the curriculum in real time. Educators and researchers dedicated to this field should recognize the value of including young people throughout the conference and invest in them as knowledge holders.

J—Just Align with the Philosophy

When selecting keynote speakers ensure they align with the philosophy and aims of the organization. In the past five years, countless physical education conferences have had celebrities and sporting athletes invited as "inspiration porn" for attendees. The term *inspiration porn* has long been associated with the disabled community, whereby disabled individuals are objectified and the inequitable structures around them are ignored (c.f. Grue, 2016). Often individuals are paraded as doing something incredible to motivate and inspire attendees in the sense that "if they can do it, so can I." The signalling and framing of individuals in this way is deeply

problematic for the disabled community, but also for those outside of it. Inspiration porn within the discipline goes beyond disabled individuals and has expanded to an array of groups, including those that are most privileged in society (such as *cisheteropatriarchy*).

The feel-good motivational speeches have little or no relevance and application to the discipline. The next day practitioners go back to school and practice does not change, educators are just in a more positive mood. While these talks feel good in the moment, they lack research-informed practice and often share things contradictory to the mission of the organization.

As an example, at a recent conference, the motivational speaker ended up promoting dodgeball in physical education, the well-known elimination game. Organizers should consider where the field is heading. If we do not want teachers doing dodgeball in physical education, then the organization should have a firm stance on what, who, and when things are promoted. The golden thread of the organization and philosophy is essential. For example, the organization cannot say they want to promote positive experiences with the knowledge that dodgeball can be detrimental to those taking part in physical education, promoting marginalization and oppression (Butler et al., 2021).

Therefore, keynote speakers should focus on advancing the profession and originate from the specific discipline, such as physical education specialists. They should not be motivational speakers or those loosely related to physical activity or the broader sports movement unless explicitly acknowledged. Pedagogical experts are likely to be present, and they offer valuable insights aligned with the conference's academic goals. Additionally, motivational speakers often command higher fees, whereas academics, as part of their professional and university expectations, will often present in return for their expenses, although a stipend should be offered in case they need to pay for childcare or additional costs. Keeping keynote costs reasonable helps to maintain affordable ticket prices for attendees.

K—Keynote Speakers

Keynote speakers should be well-informed on the topic area and recognized as experts or leaders in the field. Additionally, the invited speakers and presenters at the conference should reflect the diversity of society, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives and voices are represented. Ensuring that diverse speakers are included from the outset is integral to a conference with diverse thoughts and perspectives. Privileged groups, for example, white, cis-gendered, heteronormative males (termed *cisheteropatriarchy*) have often been overrepresented in conference keynote speakers within the health, physical education, and sport pedagogy discipline for many years now, and this overrepresentation is disingenuous and discrediting to those outside of the privileged groups that are doing incredible work. Often keynote speakers are nominations of friends of friends within the field — groups that assimilate together — so, no wonder there has been a perpetual cycle of sameness in many conference keynote lineups. Tokenistic invitees should be avoided (Barrows et al., 2021). Thus, a diverse keynote lineup is recommended, one that aligns with the organization's philosophy, has costs covered, and consists of experts in the field. These requirements are achievable when organizers broaden their searches.

L—Lanyards

Lanyards are the most impactful marketing a live conference can have. They provide instant recognition and are around the neck of all individuals. Showcasing a conference's commitment to social justice on the lanyard is significant. At the author's most recent conference, she took her LGBTQIA (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, ally) rainbow lanyard with her. She did this intentionally so that colleagues could see her affinity to the gender and sexuality cause and her allyship. She received immense gratitude for this small signifier of solidarity and many nods from conference delegates. A lanyard, therefore, becomes a symbol of hope and justice among organizations. To enhance this impact, conferences could offer a selection of lanyards reflecting various social justice themes based on attendees' preferences, such as LGBTQIA, Palestinian Flag, Black Lives Matter, or environmental causes. This approach would align with the conference theme and the sociocultural matters the organizers wish to highlight each year.

M—Meet and Greets

Attending a conference without knowing anyone can be overwhelming, especially on the first day, and may even discourage some from returning for the second day. Implementing a pre-conference program that includes a meet and greet or an academic "speed dating" activity can provide doctoral students and early career researchers with a welcoming environment to connect with experienced academics and colleagues. Additionally, attendees could be assigned a contact person or a familiar face from the meet and greet to approach if needed throughout the conference. Organizing an online get-to-know event before the conference can also foster connections and ease introductions. These activities promote a sense of belonging and can significantly enhance the overall conference experience for participants.

N—Name Badges

Name badges should include the attendee's name (including nickname), affiliation, and pronouns. While names are typically displayed on lanyards, affiliation and pronouns are often omitted. Today, pronouns are important and misgendering someone can be very triggering. To foster dialogue, name badges could also feature the person's country flag or the languages they speak. This feature would facilitate connecting colleagues for translation purposes through a buddy system. Many schools across England successfully use this approach to support students who speak English as an additional language, enhancing their knowledge and identification of flags and languages.

O—Open and Transparent Inclusivity Statement

Conference organizers should provide a clear statement during the booking process about the inclusivity measures taken and any limitations. This transparency allows potential attendees to make informed decisions about whether their needs will be met. Openly communicating the steps taken to create a welcoming environment is crucial. For instance, the location of a conference might initially deter some attendees, but knowing that the conference itself is committed to inclusivity could encourage their participation. As an example, an LGBTQIA individual might be hesitant to attend a conference in Florida due to state laws affecting LGBTQIA rights. However, if they are assured that the conference is inclusive, supportive, and has measures in place to ensure their safety, they might be more inclined

to attend. One suggestion to enhance support could be to arrange transportation from the airport or to pair delegates to travel together, ensuring a sense of safety and community from the outset.

P—Programs

Programs are essential for keeping a conference organized, but the program must be a "live" document, considering many individuals to coordinate, unforeseen travel cancellations, and last-minute issues. Therefore, hosting live documentation in a mobile application accessible in real time allows attendees to view changes as they occur. Using technology helps reduce the environmental impact and cost associated with printing, although it can add to the overall expense of the conference. Conference applications are only practical if attendees have Wi-Fi access. Despite these challenges, a program application can be highly beneficial because program changes frequently occur and paper copies quickly become outdated. At one of the author's recent conference attendances, schedule adjustments led to confusion about presentation times, and some individuals were shifted to different sessions without adequate notification, affecting their audience reach. A real-time, accessible program can prevent such issues and enhance the overall conference experience.

Q—Quiet Rooms

Quiet rooms for silence, meditation, nursing, or prayer are essential for all conference attendees. At times conferences can be full of stimulation and having a space to reflect can be important. For colleagues wishing to pray, having a safe space is vital; these rooms should be near a bathroom so that prayer rituals can be carried out. Providing such facilities demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and supports the diverse needs of all participants, enhancing the conference experience.

R—Remove Clapping

Clapping can be overwhelming for many people, especially those who are neurodiverse. To create a calmer, more inclusive environment planners could consider alternatives like silent clapping (waving hands in the air) or snapping fingers. These options are less disruptive and can benefit everyone. If events choose to move away from clapping, organizers should communicate this suggestion during the registration process and at the welcome ceremony.

S—Spaces for Rehearsals

Presenting at a conference can be very intimidating and even experienced scholars like to practice their presentation before they do it, with the conference timings and the conference computers they will need to use. Having a space where presenters can go and practice with a technology professional can be very helpful in settling nerves. Experienced presenters may also be willing to provide feedback on

the delivery for first-time or novice presenters as a way of improving presentation skills and boosting confidence.

T—Ticket Price

The ticket price significantly impacts conference attendance, often causing scholars to bear the cost themselves due to limited institutional budgets. To promote equity, ticket pricing should offer sliding scales that accommodate various needs. This approach includes reduced rates for students, participants from developing countries, those requiring childcare, and disabled attendees who face higher travel expenses (Callus, 2017). Setting an inclusive price structure considers affordability across diverse groups. There could be subsidies, bursaries, and free tickets available for groups that may struggle to attend, such as for every 10 tickets sold one free place becomes available. Providing an organizer contact for potential attendees to discuss financial challenges can also facilitate access to the conference. Cost does not then become a barrier to conference attendance.

U—Uniform

The clothes individuals wear has no bearing on their presentations, professionalism, or scholarly reputation. Thus, the smart uniform attire is highly traditional; conferences should instead promote comfortable clothing that colleagues can feel at ease in. The financial burden of wearing suits and smart clothing can be a deterrent to potential attendees and affect individuals' full participation in the conference. It is time the academic community starts being their authentic selves—we are inherently part of our research.

V—Visibility of Presentations

Conference presentations are often mixed in terms of their aesthetic appeal and readability. However, creating a suggested guide for presenters beforehand can be handy with some basic requirements. For example, ensuring slides are dyslexic-friendly (e.g., avoid white backgrounds, avoid green font, make text big enough) and providing other tips such as limiting the amount of text on the screen can be helpful for all audience members. Presenters should be encouraged to share trigger warnings for sensitive content and organizers could promote the use of a screen reader-accessible template for slides (Roo et al., 2022). A further consideration is a shared drive for attendees so that slides can be downloaded and accessed while the presenter is speaking, allowing them to follow at their own pace, making notes if needed. Presentations should be visually pleasing to the eye, informative, and support the speaker's verbal points.

W—Welcome an Expert Panel

The suggestions within this guide can seem exhaustive and overwhelming to the neophyte conference organizer. However, assembling an external expert panel for the conference planning can provide invaluable support and be a great burden shared. An expert panel can provide guidance, especially if a former conference organizer is on the panel who can talk about the lived experience of conference organizing and share best practices. The panel can review and refine the plans and program, and support any problem-solving that might need to take place. The panel can also hold the organizing committee accountable for inclusivity, ensuring there will be diverse keynote speakers and that the conference will remain within the aims and scope that have been directed by the organization. Thus, the expert panel can be very helpful in supporting the process of organizing.

X—"Xtra" Activities

Typically, the conference program is within business hours; however, there is ample opportunity for networking and socializing between attendees outside of that. The thought of individuals sitting in a hotel room on their own during the evenings and feeling alone is awful. Thus, conference organizers can provide activities for leisure time that can be structured and unstructured, providing insights into cultural and local leisure activities. At a recent conference in Finland, the organizers arranged a local walk and an immersive cold-water swimming experience that was greatly appreciated by the attendees and enabled those who would prefer not to venture out independently an avenue to see the local area and traditions of locals.

Y—YOLO Approach

While most conferences adopt the formal presentation style, it is one of tradition. Many conferences outside of health, physical education, and sport pedagogy within the wider academic sphere have many well-received conference setups. For example, *unconferences*, for which spaces are provided for individuals to dialogue without a set script about topics they are passionate about, do not need a facilitator or knowledge sharer host. There are also 3-minute thesis talks that go beyond the traditional boundary of presentations and allow for more individuals to present their ideas or things they are working on. Poster presentations are often the most accessible (Callus, 2017) delivery for conferences, but only when posters are aesthetically pleasing and easy to read because individuals can read them at their leisure. However, poster presentation sessions are often during designated periods and in crowded, noisy spaces, which can make them an overwhelming part of the conference. Thus, having posters up throughout the conference and then drop-in sessions where individuals can talk to the poster presenter are all options that conference organizers can consider. The possibilities are endless for sharing ideas and disseminating research in unique ways: the *you only live once* or *YOLO* approach. Perhaps asking the academic community for ways to transcend the traditional boundaries would be fruitful, specifically with thoughtful feminist conference pedagogies in mind (Henderson & Burford, 2020).

Z—Zap Up the Presentations

Allow for conference themes to be broad enough that people are in a space where they can stay for the entire session. If the conference themes are too broad, people will want to wander between rooms to find topics they want to listen to. For those who cannot travel, the conference can be offered both on and offline to ensure people from all backgrounds have more of a chance to see it. If this is not possible, keynote addresses and video highlights could be made available to a mailing list of those who could not attend or a live stream with snippets from the event. Think of ways to zap up the content!

Conclusion

This A-Z conference planning guide was created to offer conference participants a more inclusive and socially just experience when seeking professional development. Although the list is not exhaustive, conference organizers can use the guide to discuss what they can feasibly implement from these suggestions and identify barriers hindering implementation. Planners and organizers must collectively learn from each other to successfully host large-scale events, especially because the average teacher/faculty member does not have expertise in event planning. The future of professional development should not be daunting; it should instead be one with possibilities that can propel the discipline to new realms where innovation and creation flow and truly inspire professional thinking and holistic growth.

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