



Building blocks

Held at Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, the 2014 Research in Management Learning and Education Unconference used Lego figures as a motif for the passion, innovation and creativity experienced by delegates at the event.



GovCamp in Perth.

Delegates in the driving seat

Conference formats are changing with delegates becoming participants looking to engage in topics rather than simply be consumers of keynote speeches, discovers Sheridan Randall.

The internet changed the world in many ways, not least in the way that we communicate both personally and as part of a community or society. People are no longer passive consumers of information but want to engage with the topics and share their thoughts as well.

So it should come as no surprise that “unconferencing” grew out the tech world well over a decade ago when the term first appeared in an announcement for the annual XML developers conference in 1998. Participant driven, the new style of conference was a reaction to the top down format used by traditional conferences and reflected the democratising power of the emerging internet.

Today, unconferencing is still an adjunct to mainstream conferencing, but many of its principles are nonetheless shaping the format of traditional conferences.

The Unconference, an annual event held this year at the Hunter Valley Hotel Academy in New South Wales, sees delegates from across many community sectors invited to discuss a raft of community topics they feel passionate about including disabilities policies, organisational change, aged care and community engagement.

Co-founder Dee Brooks, director of the Jeder Institute, says the motivation behind The Unconference was to create “a level playing field and open space that people can come together around really big issues and big questions”.

Taking a leap of faith that potential delegates would embrace the free flowing format, Brooks says that the key is “setting it up in a way that people understand the self-organising aspect of it”.

“We always start in a circle so there are no rows of chairs,” she says. “There is just one big circle, or if there isn’t the space we would have two concentric circles. We don’t stand in the middle, we talk from the circle and give them a bit of an overview of what the days will look like.”

To begin with the delegates take an “appreciative listening walk” around the venue for 30 minutes where they can ponder two questions – what is it that brought them to the meeting and what is it they want to take away with them?

“We get that feedback straight away and make sure we get that addressed over the three days,” she says.

“We started this year with a half day, where

we had an introduction and meet and greet circle and went through a few group exercises to get people mixing with each other and unearthing their hidden talents or skills and sharing stories of their success.”

Rather than moderators or set speakers The Unconference uses “key agitators”, who “bring their wisdom and knowledge to the different groups”.

“People can put up their own topics and then break into groups, so you don’t have to stay in one group and move around,” she says.

The aim is to get “all facets of community invited and involved in these conversations”, with the end result being that “people are getting meatier strategies, topics and responses from what they are doing”.

Bond University’s Faculty of Business is another body that has seen success from adopting the unconference format to their annual global meeting, having recently hosted the 2014 Research in Management Learning and Education (RMLE) Unconference at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark following the success of last year’s inaugural event held in Australia. Assistant Professor George Hrivnak and Professor Amy Kenworthy partnered with

the editors of four international management education journals to run the event which attracted submissions from 52 academics representing 26 universities located across four continents.

Having a “heavily participant focused and driven feel to it”, Kenworthy says it is like a “think tank with personality”.

“We wanted a new twist on that topic and

bring new people into the fold,” she says.

“This is about bringing people together who otherwise wouldn’t come together in another format. They may pass each other in the hall in other traditional types of conferences but they wouldn’t sit down and figuratively chew on research topics together.”

With little in the way of traditional format or structure, session times can go on

for extended periods, with participants encouraged to break out, change groups or start new groups.

“At the end of the session time, which is usually around 60-90 minutes we have everyone report back about what they talked about so that everyone can connect with those people that had ideas that resonated with them,” she says. “Everything morphs



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From Left: GovCamp Sydney; GovCamp Adelaide; GovCamp Sydney; Blended learning cartoon by RMLE Unconference delegate Marc Baaij.



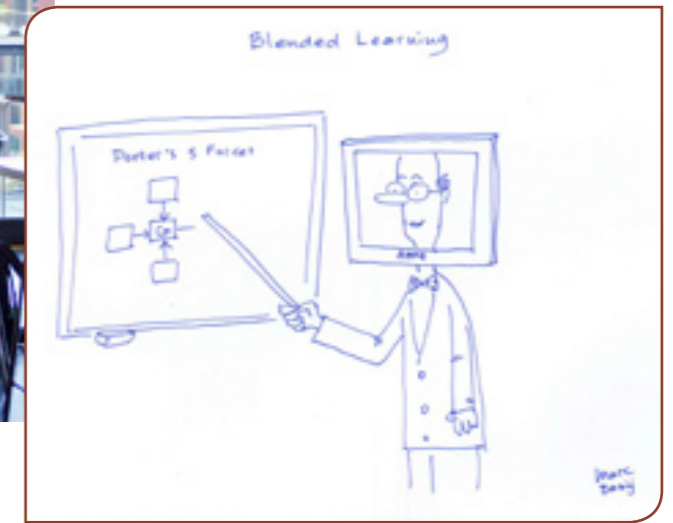
Photo by JJ Halans.



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and changes in a real time. Literally every minute things are changing and being reshaped and being discovered.”

The space itself also plays an important part in making the event work, according to Kenworthy.

“There is no way we would run one of these in a traditional auditorium unless we could put a disco ball on the ceiling to change it in a way that made it totally non-traditional,” she says.

“We are creating an environment as much as we are creating networks. It’s meant to be different and give people a voice in a safe environment to ask questions, challenge people and raise issues that you would never raise in a traditional conference format because you would only have 30 seconds in a Q&A at the end of a pre-determined pre-created presentation that you are presenting in a one way monologue to the audience.”

The event attracted around 50 participants, but Kenworth says that the format is not limited to small groups.

“It’s really about getting the right people in the space and having them interact

together,” she says. “As long as there are genuine connections being made there’s no number that I could put on that. At this point there is no going back.”

GovCamp is another initiative that emerged from a vision to create an open forum for discussion on public sector issues. It is currently coordinated nationally by the Confluence team, consisting of Allison Hornery and John Wells, with the support of the Inspire Centre at the University of Canberra.

GovCamps typically involve a day of open, informal discussion among the participants with a mix of quick presentations, 20-30 minute sessions held in parallel and plenary sessions.

“Confluence has played a leadership role in the GovCamp movement for a number of years, and for the most recent GovCamp in July, we wanted to add extra value to the format by making it a networked event – to enable participants in multiple locations to both meet locally as well as connecting the conversations across the country,” says Wells.

“We had voluntary teams in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth working together to organise an Innovation GovCamp in their city on the

same day, and we linked the cities at three points during the day by two-way video. We also experimented with setting key innovation-related themes and encouraged participants to capture their thoughts and learnings live using a collaborative note-taking tool.”

With many of the participants in the most recent nationally networked Innovation GovCamp unused to the unconference format each location ran a short workshop session at the start of the day to tease out the issues and to get people talking, before moving into unconference mode.

“Having run a few of these unconferences now, we find that it doesn’t take people long to adapt to the unconference style, and indeed we often have feedback that people find it refreshing,” he says.

“We take the approach of having a couple of facilitators on hand to help the group create their real-time agenda for the day. Then it becomes a logistical exercise to move people between rooms for each session. But it’s not about stopping people from going off tangent – in fact, we want lots of tangents! It’s often how new insights or connections

happen. The only thing we are firm about are what we call the rules of engagement, which are common to all kinds of unconference events: in essence, no pitching or selling, be respectful and share.”

The unconference format works best for groups under 150 people, to ensure a “sense of community”, according to Wells.

“Our view is that unconferences like GovCamp are a valuable personal learning opportunity like any other conference, with the added benefit of being highly experiential, rather than simply being a passive audience member in a conference. As organisers, we also have a commitment to curating the conversation from the day and communicating the insights to leaders and influencers as a snapshot of the current thinking on a particular issue or theme. In our experience, this is not an outcome you usually expect or receive from a more conventional conference.”

Technology is also changing the way delegates interact. Live streaming a conference or meeting has become commonplace with a range of do-it-yourself webinar platforms readily available including Citrix GoToMeeting, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft

Lync and Adobe Connect, according to Tim Chapman, general manager of digital event services at Staging Connections.

“The actual ability to create your own webcast means we are all getting more used to that environment and because of that we are now becoming more comfortable watching a live event in a webinar space,” he says.

However, watching a screen as a passive attendee results in very short attention spans, with the average length of passive viewing between 30 to 50 minutes.

“When you are at a live conference you are looking around a room there’s activity and a sense of being in a room with a group of people,” he says. “When you are solo sitting in front of a screen you are actually inclined to listen to it in the background and go back to doing something secondary like working on your emails.”

This is one reason Staging Connections has been proactive in bringing greater interactivity into the digital realm.

“The actual audience engagement at a virtual level has been our focus for the last year, which is why we have introduced a


webcast platform that is fully interactive whether it be live polls, being able to ask the speaker a direct question or social media feed,” he says.

“We’ve even incorporated live chat into our webcast platform so that when the real audience goes to morning tea, lunch or afternoon tea we are facilitating a video hook-up between the attendees in the virtual world, so you can be chatting to the other viewers waiting for the live sessions to be starting again.”

Rather than seeing digital technology as simply an add-on for a conference, Chapman says that event organisers should define the desired outcomes of a conference and build a digital platform around that end goal.




“To simply live stream it for free anyone can do that, but [the goal is] to keep your attendees to a point where their feedback at the end is fantastic and want to attend again in person,” he says.

“You can tailor a virtual environment much easier if you know what outcome you want. It’s not just people watching it on a screen anymore.” **CM**



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