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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

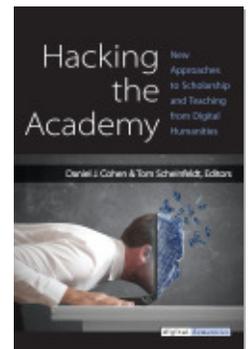
Published by University of Michigan Press

Cohen, Dan & Scheinfeldt, Joseph T..

Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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Unconferences

Ethan Watrall, James Calder, Jeremy Boggs

Notes on Organizing an Unconference

—*Ethan Watrall*

While the term “unconference” has been applied—or self-applied—to a wide variety of events, it usually refers to a lightly organized conference in which the attendees themselves determine the schedule. In most cases, unconferences attempt to avoid the traditional unidirectional paper model in favor of meaningful and productive conversations around democratically agreed upon topics—organized into sessions. Unconferences traditionally have low registration fees, and therefore run on a much more conservative budget, compared to more traditional meetings or conferences. The other thing that sets unconferences apart from traditional conferences is that they usually have far fewer attendees: it is not uncommon for unconferences to be attended by no more than 75–100 people.

Despite the fact that the unconference idea got its start—and is still going very strong—in the tech sphere, at events like BarCamp, Foo Camp, and BloggerCon, they are becoming increasingly popular in the scholarly landscape. This is no great surprise as many scholars are beginning to feel that traditional academic conferences and meetings are perhaps not as productive as they once were. In addition, in today’s economic climate (with many departments reducing, or even completely removing, travel funds), the financial burden—including the often high cost of registration—of a traditional conference has made it impossible for many scholars to attend more than one or two conferences in their domain, or perhaps none at all. Hence, the often very low registration fees of an unconference make them quite appealing.

I’m not saying there isn’t a place for traditional conferences in academia. They are important for a lot of reasons—not the least of all being part of the tenure and promotion machine. However, unconferences fill

an extremely important niche in the scholarly ecosystem. It is worth noting that several traditional conferences are planning on experimenting, or have already experimented, with unconference sessions—essentially, an unconference within a conference.

I have been very fortunate to co-organize Great Lakes THATCamp (a regional version of The Humanities and Technology Camp), and found it one of the most rewarding and exciting things I've ever done. As such, there were some things that I learned during the process which might prove useful to those adventurous souls who are thinking about organizing their own unconference—either as a stand-alone event, or as part of a traditional conference.

“Lightly Organized” Doesn't Mean No Organization

Just because an unconference doesn't have the organizational and logistical trappings of a traditional conference—lengthy paper submission/acceptance cycle, mind-boggling schedule, detailed conference program, and complete conference abstracts—doesn't mean that a lot of work doesn't go into making sure they are organized well. I was quite surprised by the number of colleagues—people unfamiliar with the unconference model—who, upon hearing that I was co-organizing Great Lakes THATCamp, said something akin to “well, I guess that means you don't have a lot to do.” Nothing could be further from the truth. If an unconference is to be done right, it's not just a matter of getting some rooms, setting a date, and spreading the word. “Light organization” is an art unto itself. There are things that need to be organized and controlled—there is absolutely no doubt about that. However, you can't step over the line into over-organization, and try to control every little bit of the event.

A Venue that Facilitates Conversation

One of the most important hallmarks of an unconference are meaningful and productive conversations—whether they take place in large groups, small groups, or between two or three attendees. As such, unconference organizers should do their best to arrange a venue that facilitates these kinds of conversations. If you can manage it, a venue with a variety of room types and sizes is great. If all you can manage are classrooms—which

might be the case if your unconference is taking place on a university campus—try to get rooms where the chairs/desks aren't bolted to the ground. This allows the attendees to reconfigure the space as they see fit. If you are able, also try to find a venue that has smaller, informal conversation spaces as well. Conference rooms are great for this. Don't discount two or three comfortable chairs—or even benches—strewn hither and yon in hallways and corners. Anywhere where people can hang out comfortably during the day and have meaningful conversations.

Remember, An Unconference Isn't About You

An unconference is as much about the participants themselves as it is about you. You might have organized the event, but it doesn't belong to you. As such, you need to make sure that, whenever possible, decisions are made by the attendees themselves. In many ways, each attendee should be seen as much of an organizer as you.

Be Flexible

This is easily the most important thing I learned when organizing Great Lakes THATCamp: be flexible. Flexibility and fluidity is the name of the game at an unconference. Attempting to control every aspect of the event with an iron fist will probably end up in disaster. If the participants want to change the overall schedule on the fly, let them—remember, the participants are as much in charge as you are. If participants decide to change the topic of a particular session midway through, don't raise a fuss. If you need to push lunch forward so that the momentum of a particularly fruitful and exciting session can continue, do so. If the way in which you planned on building the initial schedule isn't working out, figure out a better way, and don't be afraid to ask the attendees themselves.

The Bottom Line

The subtext of all of these thoughts is that you should never forget that the conversations between attendees drive an unconference. You need to do everything you can to facilitate these conversations.

Getting the Most Out of an Unconference

—*James Calder*

Over the past couple of years, I have been fortunate enough to be able to attend several unconferences, both locally and nationally. I say fortunate because these experiences have opened my eyes to how amazing the unconference format can be. I cannot think of a better way to share ideas, make personal and professional connections and generally have an extremely productive yet enjoyable time. That being said, the unconference format can be challenging and confusing, especially for those used to a more traditional conference model. Sharing some of my unconference experiences might make things a little easier.

Participation

Participation is by far the most important factor in determining whether or not an unconference will be successful. For the organizer, it is essential to get people together who truly want to be involved. For the attendee, an unconference is one of those situations where you really get back what you put in. The best sessions by far had the feel of an engaging graduate seminar class, with contributions coming from everyone, and where there was freedom for even the topic to evolve with the discussion. In other words, everyone came to participate.

I will also point out that while it's completely natural to spend the majority of your preparation time on your own presentation, my experience suggests that bringing thoughtful questions to other presentations is equally important. The best thing about an unconference is that professionals are able to come together and discuss real issues face to face. So don't lose sight of the fact that your input could be the difference between moving someone else's project forward—perhaps in ways they never expected. Related to this, make sure to pay attention to the other participants' blog/website postings and comments leading up to the conference—this, of course, being dependent on the unconference having a blog or website. Knowing what other people are thinking about before the event can jumpstart discussion in a powerful way.

What to Propose?

Another common question for prospective unconference participants is

what to propose. The most important thing I learned about unconference proposals, as both a presenter and an audience member, is that interactivity is essential. No one wants to sit around and be read to, especially when it's possible to give them a chance to react and share their own ideas.

Along with this, it cannot be stressed enough that big ideas should be welcome. Even if these ideas—as is often the case—are challenging to define, explain, or put into practical terms. Remember that because these discussions can be free-flowing, there is no need to arrive at the unconference with predetermined conclusions. Simply asking the interesting question is all that is required.

On the other hand, some great sessions were remarkably down-to-earth and practical. This was especially true when talking about technology, coding, implementation of new tools, etc. The point is, while big ideas are encouraged, practicality and pragmatism are also important components in many excellent proposals.

Enjoy Yourself

The unconference model allows for relatively informal discussions to take place. Also, because everyone is technically a presenter, many of the hierarchies found in some more traditional conferences are eased. I would advise everyone attending an unconference to take advantage of this. Make connections with people from different levels of seniority or experience. I've found that the more people enjoy themselves, the better the conversations flow, which, in turn, leads to better discussion and a more successful event. So have fun.

Let's Do It Already

—*Jeremy Boggs*

Many have loathed the rigidity, formality, and expense of traditional academic conferences. In contrast, unconfereces thrive on flexibility, collegiality, and thrift. More to the point, they rely heavily on the attendees themselves—their attitudes, motivations, and work ethics—for success or failure. At unconfereces, it generally doesn't matter who says something first; what matters more is who says something thoughtful, and what that thoughtful thing is. Discovery happens through group cooperation.

Insight and knowledge are not guarded for the next publication; they're shared openly, with hopes that others can contribute to ongoing conversations that make our work better.

This really gets to the heart of the issue: why do we attend conferences, and why do we contribute to them? Ideally, we give conference papers in hopes of sharing our research, getting recognition for such research, and getting critical feedback. We might also hope that conference paper's mere presence on the conference program grants it weight on CVs and tenure reviews, even if only half a dozen people actually came to the session to hear it read.

What if instead we start fostering systems that reward you if your unconference session spawns half a dozen projects from attendees? The focus in this case is not on what you produce yourself, but what you help others produce.

Academic conferences as they are now are increasingly expensive, poorly attended—not necessarily in terms of registrations, but in terms of people actually attending sessions—and rarely seem to generate the kind of innovative work needed to meet the challenges of education and scholarship today. If we want to start hacking the academy, let's start hacking this cornerstone of academic culture by incorporating unconference elements into the programs of traditional conferences. If you're going to an annual conference, try to organize an unconference yourself, either with support of the organization, or on your own off-site. We should start small; test some things out; make changes when necessary. But we should start, if for no other reason than to make the work we and our colleagues do better, and to make our experiences at conferences richer and more productive.