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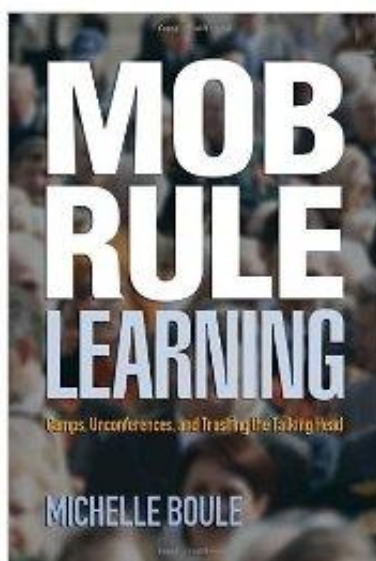
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Book Review: Mob Rule Learning

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Mob Rule Learning: Camps, Unconferences and Trashing the Talking Head. By Michelle Boule, Medford: Cyber Age Books, 2011, paperback ISBN 978-0-910965-92-7, 230 pages.

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The unconference phenomenon is something that I have heard lots about and have previously tried to read information about; however what this basic research has never been able to do is convince me of the necessity for the unconference or camp environment. Michelle Boule in this concise and easy-to-read book has managed to go at least part way to achieving this. Through use of case study, interview and example, the book provides an overview of the history of the unconference alongside the benefits it may represent to individuals and organisations. Boule illustrates the benefits of traditional conferences whilst also identifying their limitations, and therefore demonstrates where the unconference fits in.

Contents and Structure

The twelve chapters of the book are divided into two sections, and they proceed in what to my mind is a logical order. The chapters follow an identical format in each of the two sections, starting with a look at the traditional aspect, and then defining what the author perceives as different in the new movement. The middle two chapters of each section then highlight possible ways for readers to set up aspects of the unconference approach for themselves. The final two chapters look at real examples and the future. More details for each of the sections

are shown in the next two paragraphs.

The first part of the book covers the unconference movement and what it actually means. The chapters in this part cover information such as where the unconference idea originated and why the author and other cited experts felt it was a necessary development. There is also a useful chapter on how to plan a camp or unconference which can act as a checklist as well as giving more details on the various aspects on the list.

The penultimate chapter of this part covers case studies of seven different unconferences which give a great real-life look at how an unconference can develop and operate at a practical level. The first part of the book ends with a look at how the unconference concept can be applied in the future. I found it useful and interesting to learn the history of the unconference and have the rules and guidelines explained whilst also being encouraged to look forward and identify ways the elements of the unconference could be applied in my own organisation.

The second part of the book looks at how unconferences change the manner in which we learn and interact with learning. It focuses more on the education and learning gained rather than the unconference event itself. Boule starts the second part with a look at traditional learning events and conferences, and discusses the aspects of those events which may fail to benefit learners to any great degree. This overview then leads nicely onto the benefits of updating the conference experience and then expounds upon the advantages to organisations of using the 'mob' available to them in order to create learning events and opportunities. A further chapter covers how to get the most out of the people involved in the unconference or camp by looking at the obstacles that might crop up and how to overcome them. There is also a section on how to encourage the individuals who take part in such an event. The penultimate chapter of this section again offers case studies, in this case four separate ones that focus on the application of the unconference and mob learning in education. Again, repeating the format of the first section, the final chapter is looking forward to the future of allowing groups of people to educate themselves rather than relying solely on a single figurehead speaker or even multiple figureheads in the more conventional didactic conferences. I feel that this second section, whilst restricting itself to the educational aspects of unconferences, may be the most influential in terms of demonstrating opportunities to apply the idea to every-day work or learning opportunities.

The book also makes reference to a supporting Web site [1] which offers 'links to new tools and information' [2]. Unfortunately the Web site is not as formally structured as the book, which I guess is to be expected given the nature of the format, but it makes using the Web resource confusing and many of the 'recent articles' section, articles written by Boule, are available only to subscribers. The book also includes a twitter hashtag to promote discussion of the book, however there appears to be no discussion undertaken recently, perhaps an inclusion of a twitter archive on the Web site could improve the facilitation of discussion as twitter searches only bring back tweets from the previous week [3]. So, whilst I understand and notionally welcome the addition of a Web resource page, in this particular case I feel the execution may need some improvement before I would consider it relevant enough to be of real use.

Further Thoughts

This book proved useful to me since, having never attended an unconference or camp, I now feel I have a better understanding of the phenomenon and would be able to make an informed decision as to participation in such an event in the future. I would however also say that I imagine the book may not be as useful for readers who have experienced an unconference themselves, although I feel they would still appreciate the background historical information and some of the theoretical applications. The author's view that unconferences are a step forward from traditional conferences is however one to which I do not entirely subscribe. Boule makes her case well, and with plenty of examples to support her argument; however I'm not convinced that they are a replacement for traditional conferences. In various places throughout the book Boule does acknowledge the fact that unconferences are not right for every setting; nor does she belittle the traditional conference setting, which I welcomed. I felt that the book gave a balanced and rational look at the unconference movement, arguing that the traditional conference is not meeting all the needs of its target audience. Boule even suggests a halfway house between the emerging unconference setting and the traditional conference:

If traditional conferences incorporated some unconference elements into their programming, they could add a level of energy not found with a simple speaker behind the podium. [4]

The book also makes repeated reference to the concept of a 'backchannel' which is the conversation that exists online simultaneously during the conference or learning event (p.88). This element which exists at every conference I've attended, whether in the online spaces such as twitter and blogs, or face-to-face discussions among delegates over the refreshment break, is the instrument that I believe challenges Boule's assertion that traditional conferences are becoming 'dull and uninspiring' [4]. The very existence of backchannels suggests

that although the traditional conference is still following a conventional structure it need not be seen as a one-way conversation. Perhaps I've been lucky in that all the conferences I've been able to attend have included some form of unconference style element, either through the inclusion of a twitter hashtag or sessions that are interactive and enable multi-way conversations to take place.

The final part of the book, and well worth a mention as far as I'm concerned, is the 'tools and glossary' section at the end. The beauty of this section is that it gives examples of the different tools that can assist with running an unconference event. It also offers a discussion of some of the key points to consider when picking the tools, for example whether to opt for hosted or non-hosted services, and what the difference between the two options really means. For some, perhaps more technically minded readers, this may seem a little patronising, but I felt it was written in a reader-friendly style and gave me new ways of thinking about and explaining the differences. I was also pleasantly surprised by the list of tools, many of which I had heard of or indeed used, but remarked also that, for each of the sections of tools, there were one or two new ones for me to explore and investigate further.

Conclusion

Whilst I found this book an interesting read, I do wonder whether it might get a bit lost in terms of its approach. Proponents of the unconference movement will not need convincing of its benefits; however those who are more cynical about the phenomenon will, I feel, not choose to read the book, thereby placing it between two stools in terms of potential readership.

I would however recommend the book to anyone interested in finding out more about the unconference movement. Whilst reading the book has not been able to convince me that unconferences are necessarily the type of environment I personally would learn in, it has nonetheless taken some of the mystique and fear out of future participation. I would also suggest that the book may provide some interesting ideas on how to change team meetings and brainstorming sessions for managers of teams, particularly if radical change is required. However I would add the caveat that, for the unconference concept to work, not only do the participants have to be willing and feel supported, but senior management needs to accept the suggestions offered and be willing at least to try some of them out.

Overall I enjoyed reading the book and feel I've learned more about a topic that seems to be assuming greater importance in my professional life.

References

1. Boule, M. 2011. "Mob Rule" <http://www.wanderingeyre.com/mobrule>
2. Boule, M. "Mob rule learning: camps, unconferences, and trashing the talking head." 2011, p. xiii.
3. Phan Hong Thong. "Search's time limit" <https://dev.twitter.com/discussions/465>
4. Boule, M. "Mob rule learning: camps, unconferences, and trashing the talking head." 2011, p. 88.

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