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Review of Mob Rule Learning: Camps, Unconferences, and Trashing the Talking Head

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MOB RULE LEARNING: CAMPS, UNCONFERENCES, AND TRASHING THE TALKING HEAD. Boule, Michelle. *Medford, NJ: CyberAge Books, 2011, xiii+230 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-910965-92-7.*

Do you know what an unconference is? Have you attended this type of conference alternative? Have you organized a camp? If these terms have as yet gone under your radar, you will certainly be hearing more about them in coming years. Michelle Boule writes an overview to the topic and provides context for what to expect and how to apply the theory of camps and unconferences to your own conference, training session, or classroom. Boule worked as a social sciences librarian at the University of Houston from 2004-2008 and is now employed as a consultant and freelance writer. She currently serves as the Library Information Technology Association (LITA) Interest Group Chair Coordinator. She has experience developing online learning environments, teaching in-person classes, and organizing unconferences.

Used interchangeably in this book, camps and unconferences take the structure out of conferences and give voice to attendees, rather than keynote speakers and breakout session lecturers (aka the talking head). It seemed that, at conferences, more exciting and productive conversations were happening between the formal sessions - over lunch, at the bar, on backchannels (e.g. Twitter) - than during the presentations themselves. The idea, then, was to create an event that allowed attendees to directly interact with each other throughout the day, problem solving and brainstorming on pertinent issues, topics determined by conference-goers. Boule believes this format will rise in popularity as people appreciate the power of the mob and the impact unconferences can have.

The book is written in two parts. The first part focuses on explaining what an unconference is, how to organize one, and why this format works better than a traditional conference. Benefits and challenges of unconferences are highlighted. Examples of regularly scheduled and past unconferences are provided (Foo Camp, BarCamp, the 2009 ALA Unconference, etc.). Attention is given to how unconferences can be used in formats other than the typical conference setting. Part two applies the unconference model to higher education and adult learning environments. Formatting social classrooms by designing interactive online learning environments is explored. The strengths and weaknesses of the traditional classroom are discussed. Case studies for successful educational models of mob rule thinking are offered. The future of mob rule learning is considered. Most chapters include endnotes. An appendix includes an explanation for and list of low-cost and free online tools as well as a glossary.

It is apparent that Boule is well versed on the camp/unconference model, and she provides many suggestions for how to apply this model to continuing education events and the higher education classroom. The examples and case studies from public and academic libraries are useful incorporations, as they provide a conceptual model from which the reader might expressly draw practical guidance.

Just one chapter is devoted to describing how to create your own unconference. As the unconference concept follows a motto similar to “don’t plan it and they will come,” the brevity of coverage on this topic is understood; however, a bit more space could have been devoted to the how-to of event development. Case studies augment the content of the chapter on planning. The book is highly recommended for those who organize traditional conferences or staff development days, for educators (especially of adult learners or at the university level), and for those curious about unconferences and creating active learning environments.

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