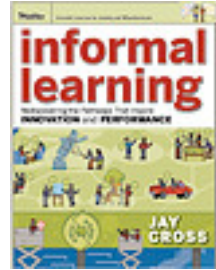


Chapter 14 of *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Innovation and Performance*, by Jay Cross



# Unconferences

I'm sitting here at a conference that I flew all the way to Paris for.. for two days, and damned if it isn't full of panels, broadcast mode all the way, telling the audience how it is. And well.. it's so freaking undynamic. Because it's not a discussion. These are bloggers. They know a lot. They know what it is. These 300 people make media every day on their blogs and yet, panels are here giving us time to email the office, our cats or the mailman about a critical lost postcard.

This audience is creative, bright, thoughtful and our brains are being numbed to death by one-way talk about how blogs are about losing legacy control and we're all taking it back. Somewhere there is a tragi-comedy in here. It's time for a revolt. Please, please, please can we do all conferences from now on differently? For the love of transparency, aliveness, I hope we can.

*Mary Hodder, Napsterization*

Business meetings used to come in one flavor: dull. New approaches are creating meetings that people enjoy, often organized in scant time, and at minimal cost. These meetings are not events; there's typically activity before and after. If something is working well, why not share it with

everyone? And why not keep it alive as long as you can? Successful gatherings are those where everyone participates.

Unconferences generally share these characteristics:

- No keynote speaker or designated expert
- High Learning, breakthrough thinking born of diversity
- High Play, having fun dealing with serious subjects
- Appropriate Structure and Control, emergent self-organization
- Genuine Community, intimacy and respect

## GEEK GATHERINGS

*Geek* used to refer a carnival performer who bit the heads off chickens. Now it's the proud moniker of techies. The Jargon File says a geek is:

A person who has chosen concentration rather than conformity; one who pursues skill (especially technical skill) and imagination, not mainstream social acceptance. Geeks usually have a strong case of neophilia. Most geeks are adept with computers and treat hacker as a term of respect, but not all are hackers themselves — and some who *are* in fact hackers normally call themselves geeks anyway, because they (quite properly) regard 'hacker' as a label that should be bestowed by others rather than self-assumed.

See also propeller head, clustergeeking, geek out, wannabee, terminal junkie, spod, weenie, geek code, alpha geek.

Geeks are dedicated learners. They go to great lengths to stay ahead of the curve. Not content to merely implement the ideas of others, geeks are driven to invent the future. The way they meet, share information, and conduct their meetings holds many ideas for corporate meetings, starting with the fact that the geeks love to go to meetings like these:

**Gnomedex**, four hundred techies and developers find the zeitgeist to change the world

**BAR Camp**, perhaps the first "Flash Conference," from conception to execution in less than a week

**Learning 2005**, fourteen hundred early adopters flock to Elliott Masie's informal learning event

## GNOMEDEX 5

Four hundred of us convened in the Bell Harbor Conference Center in Seattle to take part in Gnomedex 5, an exhilarating conference focused on developments that are propelling the next wave of innovation from the internet. In the closing keynote, Adam Curry compared Gnomedex to Woodstock. Spirits were high. Geek culture ruled. Everyone was friendly. Networking was intense. "We must be in heaven, man." Gnomedex lives on via wikis, photos, recordings, newsgroups, podcasts, and more on the web.

Gnomedex is an extension of the most energetic guy I have ever met, Chris Pirillo. A perpetual clown, Chris is always laughing, joking, smiling, and enthusiastic, the sort of fellow who lights up a room. Somehow he still finds time to be a geek's geek, one of those guys who seems to know every arcane detail of the latest Microsoft patch and at the same time able to envision the technology space many moves ahead. In his spare time, he writes newsletters and books, appears on radio and t.v., and consults to tech companies.

The Gnomedex show began as a conference that treated its audience as well as its speakers. Chris held the first three Gnomedexes in his hometown, Des Moines, which made it the cheapest PC conference around. A conference in Tahoe came next, leading up to the big event in Seattle.

The evening reception the night before things opened up featured endless hors d'oeuvres and an open bar, but it wasn't just the alcohol that created this schmooze-fest. It was instant community. Shared interest. We're all in this together. Alpha developers and top tech pundits were fully accessible. Throughout the conference, the meals, breaks, and events left plenty of time for schmoozing.

A new technique for creating and subscribing to newsletters and homemade radio shows (RSS) was the nominal reason for the gathering of this tribe. By the time we departed, numerous people were saying Gnomedex would go down in history as the tipping point where people took back control of the media.

Imagine, if you will, four hundred hardcore geeks, each with a laptop and with on again/off again wireless net connections, and countless phone cams, video cams, heavy-duty digital SLRs, microphones, DAT recorders, and more, all documenting what was going on, many in real time

Ninety minutes after the close of the conference, participants had posted 1,500 photographs on the web. Have a question about a particular session? You could watch one or more video recordings; nothing new there. But then you could read the opinions of dozens of people on what you just watched, among them some of the most astute in the business.

In what will be commonplace a year from now, the conference had a spot on the web where anyone could post announcements or check the

attendance list, including the web sites of most attendees. The wiki will live on until next year's Gnomedex.

Which has more value for you, a generic course in leadership skills or a personalized coaching session from your mentor? An episode of *Law & Order* or a streaming video of your grandchildren? As the cost of production nears zero, the economics of narrowcasting is stood on its head.

The conference itself was streamed over the net. You could watch the event as it unfolded. A fellow in Florida wrote in the real-time chat that the quality was awesome. Chat? Yes, a number of people in the audience were swapping ideas on the net during the presentations.

The first keynote speaker, Dave Winer, told us this was not a speaker and audience. Clearly, there was more intelligence in the room than on the stage. The audience brings more to the party than the speaker. So this is an *unconference*. The audience talks but a runner holds the microphone for them. *Don't touch!* Nobody gets to monopolize the conversation. It's not you and me; this is for us.

Several sessions were recorded for replay as podcasts. The Gillmor Gang hosted a lively session with the brothers Gillmor (Steve and Dan), Doug Kaye, Dave Winer, and Adam Curry. Doug, who invented and runs IT Conversations (which distributes technical conference sessions and interviews for free), pointed out that at least 100,000 people would hear this session in recorded form.

## FOO CAMP

O'Reilly and Associates invited several hundred people “who're doing interesting work in fields such as web services, data visualization and search, open source programming, computer security, hardware hacking, GPS, and all manner of emerging technologies to share their work-in-progress, show off the latest tech toys and hardware hacks, and tackle challenging problems together. The Fifth Annual FOO Camp.”

Here's Tim O'Reilly's introduction, from the event wiki:  
FOO Camp started out as a lark. We had a lot of extra space in our new building as the result of the dotcom meltdown, and we wanted to do something fun to make use of the space. Internally, we tended to use the term FOO for "Friends Of O'Reilly", and we'd occasionally do "FOO parties" at our conferences for the conference committee, speakers, and authors in attendance. Sara Winge, our VP of Corporate Communications, used to joke about having a "FOO Bar" at these parties.

So we invited a bunch of people up for a big party at our new campus, and decided to run it as a self-organizing conference.

It was such a success that we decided to do it again. And we realized that

it actually had a great business purpose: to make us smarter as a company, by introducing our employees to our extended family of people who collectively comprise "the O'Reilly Radar," and by introducing these people to each other. Each of us had great contacts who we wanted to introduce to other folks at O'Reilly and to each other, and we also had people we wanted to meet that an occasion like this gave us a great excuse for reaching out to.

So now, the way we think of FOO is this: it's our chance to get to know new people who are doing interesting work in fields that we are trying to learn about.

Here's the problem: the first FOO camps were so successful that all the original people want to come back. We had to choose between just throwing a party every year, with the same people coming each time, or mixing it up, inviting a mix of people we already know and love, and people we think we'd like to know and think we're going to love. We only have room for about 200 people, so we have to make some hard choices about who to invite.

FOO camp is *notoriously* self-organizing. O'Reilly provides food, showers, facilities, and a wi-fi network. Participants make up the agenda when they arrive.

You bring your ideas, enthusiasms, and projects. We all get to know each other better, and hopefully come up with some cool ideas about how to change the world.

Last year, Business 2.0's John Batelle wrote, "Talking with attendees, I couldn't help thinking that FOO was more than fun -- it was important, and not just to the characteristically self-involved lot who proudly wear the geek label."

O'Reilly is located an hour north of San Francisco in Sebastopol, once the world's largest producer of apples and now famous for its Zinfandel wines. FOO campers are encouraged to sleep over, either outside in the former orchard or in someone's workspace inside.

There's the problem: there's not enough space for every A-list geek. One influential Google employee posted this to his blog,

*Why I'm not going to Foo Camp*  
I wasn't invited.

If you are the type of person who reads this blog and might be prone to drop one of those 'so...going to Foo Camp' lines to see what brand of smart kid I am - well, I didn't make the cut. I don't know what to tell you.

The following day, another person blogged,

I just read your post about not going to Camp Foo, and wanted to chime that I'm wasn't invited back this year either. Unlike you, however, I'm quite upset about it. I personally know enough people who are going to make it somewhat embarrassing - like I didn't make some sort of intellectual or professional cut or something.

Less than a week before FOO Camp 2005 was set to open, this post appeared on Andy Smith's blog:

FOO Camp happens every year, it is an invite-only event for tech luminaries hosted in Sebastopol, CA at the O'Reilly headquarters. People camp out, have sessions, and work with other great tech minds to come up with awesome ideas. The problem is the exclusivity: everybody isn't invited.

Meet BAR Camp, an open, welcoming, once-a-year event for geeks to camp out for a couple days with wifi and smash their brains together. It's about love and geekery and having a focal point for great ideas, like FOO but open.

BAR Camp came together in under a week. Chris Messina and Andy Smith started the BAR Camp ball rolling. (If you have not served in the armed forces, you may not be familiar with the term FUBAR, pronounced foo-bar. Let's just say that the BAR part stands for "beyond all recognition." You'll have to figure out the FU for yourself.)

From Chris Messina's blog:

When we embarked on this strange and fantastic journey, we knew that we had a week. We had no money, no sponsors, no venue and no idea if just the five of us or 50 random folks would show. But we knew that we had to stage BAR Camp and that, among other things, it would serve as a demonstration of the decentralized organizing potential of the *Web2.0 Generation*. We set out to prove that what the good folks at O'Reilly could pull off in a year with a couple years' experience and tens of thousands of dollars, could be cobbled together in a week by a crazy gaggle of savvy geeks, leveraging only the web and the our reach into our social networks.

So here we are, five days later and two days from the event. We've had a venue donated to us. (Three days before things were to start, Ross Mayfield volunteered SocialText's new offices in Palo Alto as an urban campsite.) We've got a fabulous logo (*thanks Eris!*). We've got some sponsors lining up up and a bunch of great advisors. And we've got buzz.

This is turning out to be the exact kind of unprecedented success we were hoping for—and from here it can only get better as we lead up to the kick-off.

Remember "flash mobs"? People coordinate on their cell phones to all show up at a given location at the same time. Two hundred people cram into the lobby of the St. Francis Hotel and before management can say "What the ...?" the crowd vanishes. BAR Camp strikes me as a "flash conference." Lots of people, technology, logistics, and experts create a successful conference in six days flat.

Ross Mayfield, CEO of SocialText and our host, blogged that...

... you need to remember what has changed -- the cost of group forming has fallen -- so anyone create one of their own, almost instantly. This will not lead to more competition between groups, but understanding across them.

On Tuesday, Dave Winer's blog pointed to Andy's page about BAR Camp, quoting "an open, welcoming, once-a-year event for geeks to camp out for a couple days with wifi and smash their brains together."

I commented on Andy's blog, "Where's the BAR Camp wiki?" He replied "barcamp.org" and added, "And yes, we'll be documenting the whole thing — one thing we want more than anything is for BAR Camp to live beyond this one weekend. Think: BAR Camp in Box. That's basically what we want coming out of this year's event.;D"

## BAR CAMP

Around seven o'clock Friday evening, Chris stands atop a concrete pedestal in the courtyard outside SocialText's new offices to kick things off. People are asked to introduce themselves to the group using no more than name, location, company affiliation, and three words. Some of the words of three that I remember: geek, entrepreneur, save world, ninja, real-time, fanatic, blogger, society. I say "author, informal, learning" and later will explain that I'm at BAR Camp both as a geek and as an anthropologist studying how techies learn about new stuff from one another.

A dozen large pizzas arrived, beer bottles were opened, and three or four discussions among five to a dozen participants got going. Eugene Kim and a handful of us hunkered down outside to discuss Extreme Usability. We passed the talking stick, speaking the argot of software design and programming to relate Extreme Usability to Agile Software Development, Extreme Programming, rapid prototyping, constructive friction, pair programming, Homer Simpson, and Ruby on Rails. The

Homer episode and Ruby were new to me, so that part of the discussion would have meant about as much to me in Greek. I drew analogies to developing business processes that John Hagel and John Seely Brown describe in *The Only Sustainable Edge*. Eugene facilitated the session, encouraging everyone to contribute. He was also recorder, tapping notes into his PowerBook to be posted to the wiki later on.

In one room, five people were hunched over their laptops, tapping away. I asked if this were a session. No, not a session. What were they doing, then? “Just hacking,” came the response. This seems to be a standard behavior at geek events. It's kosher to drop out of the live event and hook into the virtual reality of the net. Check mail, tweak code, surf blogs, see what's going on in the next room via the net – these are all as legitimate an activity as conversing face-to-face. I sense that just being among their own kind gives off sort of a contact high.

I spied a fellow I'd met at lunch during Gnomedex: Scott Beale, proprietor of Laughing Squid. He's managing publicity for BAR Camp. I wanted to tell him how much I enjoyed his photographs of Gnomedex and also to show him the purple Laughing Squid sticker on my ThinkPad. Geeks put stickers on their computers just as Harley riders get tatoos. Geeks have introduced themselves to me in airports because they assume someone whose computer sports stickers for Laughing Squid, FireFox, Creative Commons, and the Michelin Man must be a member of the tribe.

This camaraderie is a major shift from the dot-com era of the late nineties. Then geeks talked about getting rich, the value of their stock options, and which model Ferrari they should buy. People found it tough to live in their own skins. Everybody wanted to be a Steve Jobs.

Then came the dot-com meltdown. It was like nuclear winter. Companies went down the tubes. Money vanished. Everyone disappeared. Traffic jams in Silicon Valley became rare. People are coming out of that now, but they are coming back as themselves. No more play-acting. They're out to change the world.

Geeks are passionate. That's the rule in a many communities, from owners of Mini Coopers to collectors of guitar picks. There are people who lay in bed at night thinking about their particular cause. Employers look for this level of enthusiasm in prospective employees; it's more important than technical chops.

Shared norms make geeks a community of practice, and that makes it possible to host instant meetings like BAR Camp. Most traditional employers I've talked with do not encourage membership in communities outside the corporate firewall. They are unwittingly taking themselves out of the grapevine that announced new ideas and sparks innovation.

A woman comes by with a tray of BAR Camp buttons. She says that in the old days, this would have taken weeks. Now “the Asian sweatshop button factory” (she and a volunteer) is operating in the front room. As if by magic, BAR Camp t-shirts appear. Events t-shirts are yet another badge of



belonging to the geek community.

On the ride home, I reflected on how BAR Camp differed from corporate sessions. A corporation would have tried to cram everything you needed to know into the two-day session. Content would have oversaturated people's brains after two hours and excess information would be pouring out of their ears. They'd be learning more and more about less and less.

BAR Camp provided exposure and teasers for dozens of contents. We focused on breadth, not depth. If something grabbed your attention, you could follow up with the speaker afterward or you could check a recording or see what was listed on the wiki or go to the relevant website. This format treats learning as an ongoing process; the meeting is but step one.

BAR Camp also created a social structure that may or may not persist. If I want to check something out with someone I spoke with, I can locate them via the wiki.

At most corporate events, presenters parade to the podium, facetiously saying they want to *share* their thoughts while their body language, tone, and PowerPoints tell another story. Most of them want to tell you how it is and how it's going to be. This is like your boss "sharing" his thoughts on what you're going to do next. Questions come after the presenters have had their say.

There were no presentations at BAR Camp. No PowerPonTs. No better-than-thou. No podium. No positions carved in stone. Instead of presentations, campers had conversations. We were equals, co-discovering new ways to look at things. We sat in circles. No one was in charge because we were all in charge.

Doc Searles, a highly influential blogger, wants to "reboot the whole conference system." In Linux Journal, Doc writes:

The problem is mass habituation. We're so used to the whole routine: picking up badges, grabbing coffee and cookies, sitting in rows behind tables with laptops flopped open, surfing the Web or answering e-mail while keynoting CEOs from sponsoring companies drone PR while the PowerPoint deck shuffles by, complaining about the absent power strips and bad Wi-Fi connection. The list goes on. And on.

What's the alternative? Give control to the audience. Respect what they bring to the table. Here's Doc again:

A guy I was talking with had a cool idea for conferences like this one. Set it up like any other conference--with speakers, panels and so on--and then announce at the beginning that all the speakers were bait, that the whole conference is completely open. Anybody can learn anything from anybody. Bring up the house lights, arrange the chairs in circles, roll out the hors d'oeuvres.

With no speakers, every attendee's expertise is a "source" for every other attendee. Conversation becomes the most efficient and effective means for moving and growing knowledge throughout whole crowd. The idea here is a profound corollary to Bill Joy's observation that "most of the smartest people work for somebody else". The balance of smartness in any conference session heavily favors the audience. So, what's the most efficient and effective way for everybody to share what they know?

We've been lecturing at conferences for the last umpty years. Audiences have been opting out through schmoozing in hallways, hanging out on IRC channels, blogging, IMing and e-mailing each other. In other words, they're going to other sources of knowledge.

Doc has many suggestions.

Hold collegial meetings, not sessions. Some of the best sessions at conferences are the BoFs, or birds-of-a-feather sessions, held after hours.

Record all sessions and make them available on-line in open audio formats. This also helps sell attendees on coming to the next conference.

Make the Web a living and permanent resource and document archive. Provide wi-fi.

## LEARNING 2005

Elliott Masie is a larger-than-life figure in the learning business, a thought leader but also an impresario. He has great stage presence, a big heart, an incredible record of accomplishment psyching out trends in learning, brilliant intuitive marketing skills, an impeccable sense of timing, and a large following.

He got on the computer training bandwagon before it was popular. He sold his conference to a technology publisher, which promptly ran it into the ground. As soon as his non-compete agreement with the publisher expired, Elliott began producing the popular TechLearn conferences. He sold the TechLearn franchise for millions a month before 9-11 put the kibosh on travel and conferences. When *that* non-compete agreement expired, Elliott announced Learning 2005, an unconference breaking all of the rules, to the delight of his fans and forward-looking learning professionals.

Learning 2005 set out to be an informal learning event. Believing that discussions in the hall are more important than formal sessions in the breakout rooms, Elliott set out to made breakouts more like hallway discussions:

“One of my pet peeves is the way in which one hour sessions at events over-promise the content to be addressed. And, when leaders roll out a two dozen slide presentation, there goes the interaction. So, we are changing the model by dousing the overhead projector, placing the 1 Pagers on interactive wikis for pre and post viewing/expansion and limiting the session leaders to a 1 Pager.”

Elliott told us everything at Learning 2005 was about extreme learning. That's experimentation that is one standard deviation away from your customer zone. You can't experiment unless you're willing to fail. Elliott encouraged us all to push the envelope, to become comfortable with the unpredictable. As Chairman Mao said, “You want to make an omelet, you break a few eggs.”

Among the experiments at Learning 2005:

- Building a learning lab and training marketplace in a virtual reality environment.
- Hosting the Conference Program, announcements, and session feedback on an openly-accessed wiki.
- An on-line social networking system to enable participants to hook up with like-minded souls and set up times for personal meetings.
- “LearningLand,” an immense open space with ten or so “pods,” chairs grouped around giant flipchart boards. Each pod is intended to seed a community or special interest group. Eileen Clegg had drawn starter graphics to get people thinking. Chairs and tables are spread about to foster conversation.
- In one corner of LearningLand, you could take a break by learning to throw pots. (I mean *throw* as potters do, not as in breaking dishes.)
- Wireless response devices to gather instantaneous audience feedback.

On opening night, more than a thousand participants filed into a big ballroom to the beat of a country/zydeco band. Elliott takes the stage and tells us Learning 2005 is going to be different from past events. We're going to have lots of conversations, discussions, arguments, a variety of folks, citizen journalism, voting, liquid learning. We're going to mix it up.

Times are way faster, more challenging and more confusing than ever.

That's why we're embracing extreme learning. Extreme Learning deals is *high velocity*; we can no longer afford to take 18 weeks to develop a program. We'll talk about *personalization*. Google is responsive, PowerPoint is not. We want *scalability*. We've been training the competent and available; the incompetents never make it to the session. We're going through different generations of learners.

At one point, Elliott said, "I've lost control," missing the point that the future entails getting control by giving control. I began to classify what I was experiencing here as old-school or new-school:

Old School	New School
Talking at us	Talking among ourselves
Control	Connection
Keynotes	Interviews
Audience	Participants
Follow the rules	Push the boundaries

My session on informal learning the following day was packed with enthusiastic people. It was fun. This was my first presentation in longer than I can remember that used no PowerPoint. It improved the flow. Things felt more spontaneous -- because they were.

Many sessions were more dialog than presentation, and audience involvement came naturally. The exception were the vendors, who almost universally presented PowerPoint (a no-no) sales presentations (another no-no) to people lined up in rows (doesn't promote informality). If the vendor community doesn't change with the times, the times will break them.



*What's wrong with this picture. (The layout discourages interaction.)*

The day after I flew back to Berkeley, my mind was on fire with ideas. Snippets and flashes of Orlando were still in turmoil in my head, seeking connections with my life's stored patterns. The mind's post-processing is one reason that evaluation sheets completed immediately upon the close of a session are meaningless. You don't know what will last until patterns have started to sink in and connect to your worldview, and experience has settled on which ones are keepers.

Throughout Learning 2005, people struggled to force-fit new ideas into old frameworks. How can I add some informal learning to our formal learning? How can I measure informal learning with my LMS? How can I insure that they learn what they need to? Can't our competency management system run things? I'm of two minds on these issues.

On the one hand, organizations can profit immediately from applying the techniques described in this book. Many techniques described here can increase revenue and innovation while diminishing cost and bureaucracy.

On the other hand, a piecemeal approach will never spark organizational transformation. Getting the most out of a broader definition of learning requires unlearning the vestiges of the way we're accustomed to interpreting the world.

"Incrementalism is the enemy of innovation," said Nicholas Negroponte. You can't retrofit all the new innovations to last year's model. Is your organization ready for extreme innovation?

In spite of forewarning, some people thought they had signed up for just another conference. Their three-day experience bore little resemblance to mine. Many were uncomfortable with the flexibility, the alternatives, and the margin for confusion, compared to their expectations. Some griped about anything unconventional but I sense many of these poor folks always drink from a half-empty glass.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as are effectiveness, value, enthusiasm, brilliance, opportunity, and the softness of the pillows. I became a different person at Learning 2005, and I hope to continue waking up as a new person every day. To learn is to be. Change requires a new way of being in the world. Be all that you can be. Think of it as extreme makeover.

**Jay Cross** is a champion of informal learning, web 2.0, and systems thinking. He puts breakthrough business results ahead of business as usual. His calling is to change the world by helping people improve their performance on the job and satisfaction in life.

He has challenged conventional wisdom about how adults learn since designing the first business degree program offered by the University of Phoenix three decades ago.

Now in its ninth year, Internet Time Group LLC has provided advice and guidance to Cisco, IBM, Sun, Genentech, Merck, Novartis, HP, the CIA, the World Bank, the World Cafe, and numerous others. It is currently researching and refining informal/web 2.0 learning approaches to foster collaboration and accelerate performance.

Jay served as CEO of eLearning Forum for its first five years and has keynoted major conferences in the U.S. and Europe.

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