Librarycamp: an unconference for people who want to improve libraries

Photo: Sasha Taylor

Sue Lawson
Librarycamp UK

Sue Lawson of Librarycamp UK talks about how to organise unconferences for people interested in improving libraries, and shares useful tools and resources for anyone in any field interested in bringing the unique benefits of the 'unconference' format to their sector.

What's Librarycamp?

In November 2013, 200 library fans, workers and users from across the UK and Ireland joined forces at the third annual Librarycamp unconference at the Library of Birmingham. Librarycamp is a free unconference with the agenda set by attendees on the morning of the event. This year 36 different sessions took place throughout the day. It was a fantastic event and we're already planning Librarycamp 2014 plus an additional one day festival of public libraries (think mini Glasto for libraries).

If you have an arts discussion topic or panel you'd like to organise; a project or demo to present; a hack you want to work on; a workshop or how-to you'd like to share then you should think about organising an unconference.

What's an unconference?

Put simply it's a Do-It-Yourself conference. Ours is for people interested in libraries but many organisations run them – there's UKGovCamp, HousingCamp, CommsCamp, BlueLightCamp, WordCamp, ThatCamp and lots more. They are DIY because anyone can organise one. And they're called unconferences because there isn't an agenda until people make suggestions for what they'd like to talk about at the start of the day.

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How does it work?

Our objectives are to share our innovative projects and successes, to network with other library staff from different sectors, to learn, to talk, debate, eat cake and leave re-energised and inspired. Our target audience is anyone interested in libraries (whether you work in a library or not.) Throughout the day, participants will take part in more than 25 different sessions including workshops, round-table discussions, panels, how-tos, hacks, screenings and more. Because attendees pitch the topics the resulting workshops are usually really diverse. They have included: DIY MOOCs for Digital Literacy, Open Source for Libraries, Library Box, Proving the Value of Public Libraries, Create a National Public Library Website, Improving Library Publishing and more.

So, what do you need to stage an unconference?

A team, a venue and patience. Our team are all volunteers, we do this in our spare time and we all have full time jobs or are in full time study so sometimes things can take a little longer. We raised funds through sponsorship, crowdfunding and a donate button on our blog. Each national event has cost approximately £2500, but if you don't offer catering and secure a free venue then your costs will be pretty low. We used Eventbrite to ticket the event and Twitter, our blog, LinkedIn, a wiki, online message boards and word of mouth to promote the event. It's free, so demand for tickets is always high with nearly all the tickets snapped up in the first few days. We keep in regular contact with ticket holders through Eventbrite and operate a waiting list as 'no shows' for free events can be high. Keeping in regular contact means we build up a relationship with attendees and they are more likely to let us know if they can't attend. We also release about 25% more tickets than the venue will hold to cover 'no shows'.

With an unconference you don't need to plan an agenda because that's the first session of the day. During the first hour of the event people stand up and pitch ideas for sessions. When the pitching is over a group of us schedule all the sessions. You can do this on a flipboard, a spreadsheet or post it notes on a grid on a wall! There's usually 4 or 5 sessions running at once and each session lasts 50 minutes – but that's up to you. This year we ran over 30 sessions. The other handy thing about unconferences is that they're usually run to the hippy principles of Open Space Technology which states "if at any time during our time together you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet, go someplace else" meaning you can get up and leave a session whenever you want and you can join another parallel session anytime.

What's the point?

Not only do unconferences help to shape and share ideas – they also help establish a broad network in and out of the library world. It's time to stop thinking of unconferences as innovative and start thinking of them as the norm. Nobody has to be an expert, and often we find out that we all are. People at all levels of the profession attend and have stuff to say. Some don't work in libraries, some of those never want to. Some have been on the front line without a qualification doing amazing work for 20 years. Some are managers, consultants and directors.

What is Librarycamp not?

LibraryCamp is open to everyone, and that's why we make it free and accessible and locate it in the best place we can. But it's not suitable for everyone, because not everyone wants to participate. We don't enforce leading sessions or prod at people to talk, but it doesn't work if you just turn up and listen or only talk to people you've met before.

What people say about Librarycamp?

> *"The atmosphere was vibrant and eclectic – it was fantastic to see so many people join together in their own time on a Saturday (lots travelling many miles early in the morning or the night before) to share their experiences, views and feedback on so many diverse library themes."*

Librarycamp 2013 - Mitchley's DMU Blog - Mitchell Dunkley

> *"We were excited to attend one of 2013's most collaborative and accessible UK library events"*

Open Source Toolkit for Libraries: a writeup of our #libcampuk13 workshop – Artefacto
by Sara Wingate Gray and Kate Lomax

> *"From my perspective it was a bloody brilliant day which gave me a chance to catch up with some old friends, make a few new ones and exchange views, insight and opinion with some very bright and enthusiastic people. If you ever get the chance to go to this, or the regional Library Camps around the country – I'd say go, and go soon!"*

Hello Campers 2013 Edition - Llord Llama's Research Ramblings - Llord Llama

We're also more than happy to share information on how we organise unconferences, which has served as motivation for the rapid development of additional regional camps. We don't organise these camps. They're run by local teams and since 2012 there have been at least eight regional librarycamps plus Radical Librarycamp. In 2014 we've heard about a second Radical LibraryCamp in London, a series of school librarycamps plus two more librarycamps in Leeds and Canterbury and of course LibraryCamp UK 2014.

Additional resources

- Library Camps: what do you need?
  (Useful for any unconference organiser) by Carolyn Schneider
- Tips for Unconference newbies by Andy Mabbett
- HYPER GO: Why bother with an unconference? by Dan Slee
- Open Space Technology Wikipedia page
- LibraryCampUK14 photos by Sasha Taylor
- Reviews and blog posts about the events are all bookmarked at Pinboard