



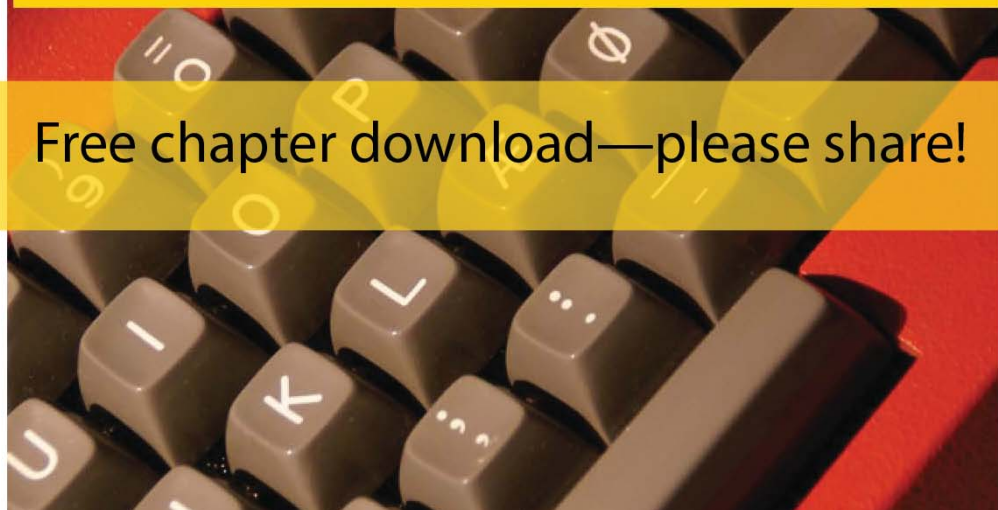
Conversation and Community

The Social Web for Documentation

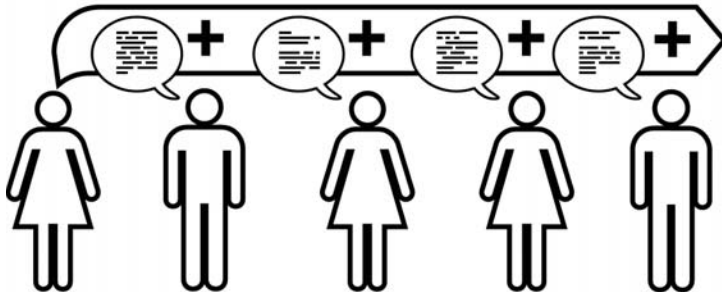
by **Anne Gentle**

foreword by Andy Oram

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4: Community and Documentation



The scale of the global community that is going to be able to participate in all sorts of discovery and innovation is something that the world has simply never seen before.

*—Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat**

This chapter explores the idea that a small group of people who have a sense of belonging in an online community may provide content much like a technical writer does. Regardless of their background, education, or training, more people are becoming providers of technical information on the web. The gift economy, where altruism motivates contributions more than monetary gain, is partially responsible for this shift. Chris Anderson, author of *The Long Tail*, also wrote the article, “Free! Why \$0.00 Is the Future of Business” for *Wired* magazine¹ in February of 2008. In the article he describes a taxonomy of “free” that contains many models including the gift economy. In *Naked Conversations*, bloggers Robert Scobel and Shel Israel state “Altruism turns people on even more than

¹ http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/magazine/16-03/ff_free?currentPage=all

making money.” Combine these altruistic motivations with a publishing system that has a low barrier to entry and you get a whole new way of working and writing.

If anyone can be a writer, what communities of writers have formed, and what have they accomplished? Why would you leverage someone’s sense of community belonging for documentation instead of hiring professional writers? How do you form communities online and in the real world?

What is a community?

Community has many definitions, but an *online community* has specific elements that shape its definition. From a blog entry by Forrester Research analyst Jeremiah Owyang comes this definition: “An online community is: Where a group of people with similar goals or interests connect and exchange information using web tools.”² As you might expect from a community researcher, Owyang says that his Twitter followers helped him shape that definition. Howard Rheingold defines a virtual community in his book, *The Virtual Community*, as “when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships.” Think of the online communities you belong to. You know there are common elements of discussion, agreement, core values, and unifying goals that help you identify it as a community. Relationships are the makeup of communities. Connections with each other establish relationships. Not all relationships in a community have to be positive—even contentious debate can help a community meet its goals as long as the relationships remain respectful and intact after discussions.

Although in-person collaboration is an aspect of communities and documentation, much communication happens only online until community members meet at a conference or a networking event. Much of the communication that helps you

² <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2007/12/28/defining-the-term-community/>

feel like you know a person in the community happens online long before a face-to-face meeting. It's that in-person or online conversation and public discourse that forges the relationships that create a community.

What's not a community?

Sometimes the tools that help create the connections are mistaken for the community itself. Community is built from the connections, not the tools. For example, a blog with comments might constitute a conversation, but it does not constitute the community itself. This distinction is important for a few reasons. First, it can help you choose which tools you can use to form a community. Second, it can help you understand why you might not have a community on your hands, yet, even though the right tools are in place. And, it can help you understand why a wiki has few edits yet many hits. Perhaps the sense of belonging to a community with a specific purpose and set of goals and the motivations that follow are not yet present. Or perhaps the technology layers are not familiar, so people don't feel comfortable in an online community until they make sense of the tools for communication and interaction.

Motivations for writers and online communities

Why are any of us interested in documenting a complex product or process? It's possible that the core of our motivation is recognition or reward, measured in terms of money or success. Or maybe we think that writing and communicating with text, images, audio, or video is a great way to make a living. But, an underlying motivator for many technical writers is the desire to help others learn. By teaching, you learn twice. By joining a community, being a community member, and looking for places where you can either contribute or motivate

others to contribute, you are empowering collaborative efforts unlike any seen in the past. What I am observing more is that community members who do not have a writing role still want to write or communicate information about the product or service.

I can identify with the desire to help people through my work with the One Laptop per Child project. My kids and the kids in my son's preschool classroom inspired me to work for the first time on an open source project. My first experience with Sugar, the open source operating system for the laptop, was an emulation on my laptop, and I was floored by its elegance and simplicity, created by a community of developers and usability experts giving their time to the project. I was inspired by the high quality of their offering and wanted the documentation to match it.

I have found my volunteer work to be invaluable as a learning experience and exercise in connecting to others. But I will also admit that one of my motivations has been to experiment with publishing and book promotion, with an idea in the back of my head that FLOSS Manuals could hit upon a huge best-selling book idea.

Before the OLPC Book Sprint in August, the FLOSS Manuals community had quite a nice discussion about money and free documentation. Income from book sales is typically used to further fund FLOSS Manuals' goals as a non-profit community—invest your gains to further your aims.

So while writers are accustomed to earning money directly for writing, they might find that they are motivated not by the money itself but by the additional activities the money can fund. For example, profits from a Book Sprint can be used to fund future Book Sprints.

New roles for writers

One of the roles I learned about while writing for a wiki is "community manager." In many wiki environments, the writer can be the "content curator," someone who assembles

collections based on themes. But if your goal is to build and grow a wiki, you need to build and grow the community for it first. People who feel they are part of a community may share knowledge as the community becomes a community of practice. Clay Shirky, in his talk about his book, *Here Comes Everybody*,³ explains how quickly a community of practice can form now that online tools speed up the process of teaching specific techniques and learning them from others. A community of practice uses people as conduits to transfer knowledge. As those who study knowledge management have learned, workers spend a third of their time searching for information, and workers are five times more likely to turn to experienced co-workers for information rather than reading a book, thereby shortening their learning curve and hopefully avoiding mistakes.

You have probably heard of the phrase “train the trainer.” You may even imagine that your role as a writer is to write to the person who reads enough to learn a product inside and out and become the in-house expert for it. As an extension of that writer’s role of training the trainer, a writer may become a leader within the online community, teaching other community members. This trainer role may be highly motivating to some.

Particular types of users are more likely to seek out online communities for information—competent performers, proficient performers, and expert performers, as defined by Dreyfus and Dreyfus in *Mind over Machine*. In their “Model of Skill Acquisition,” these types of users are separated from the novices and advanced beginners, who represent the first two stages in the model. Advanced users are more likely to demand useful examples, instructions for getting results or achieving a specific goal, and advanced troubleshooting information.

When managing a community of experts, realize that the rules of the community can make entry difficult. Consider that some communities have an unspoken “no whining” rule,

3 <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/interactive/events/2008/02/shirky>

which creates a very different atmosphere than a community that has a “there are no dumb questions” philosophy.

Free as in freedom documentation

Why do people contribute to documentation for no payment or even unknowingly, since they don’t consider themselves to be writers? Andy Oram, senior editor at O’Reilly Media, studied contributions to documentation by surveying people who contribute to online forums, email lists, or wikis. His “Why Do People Write Free Documentation? Results of a Survey”⁴ report contains many findings, some of which are surprising:

- People generally don’t think that they were contributing to documentation.
- People don’t think of themselves as writers, despite the fact that the communication is written.

Because the people surveyed were not paid directly for their written contributions, their contributions could be considered free as in “no-cost.” In open source circles, “free” can mean “freedom” rather than “no cost.” “Free” documentation, however, represents a shift away from these two definitions.

The email/Internet/search engine infrastructure that is in place enables all of us to feel like we are getting and giving information for free. In reality, a small group of people who have computers and pay \$40 per month for high speed Internet access offer their time and knowledge in information exchanges in the hope that they will be repaid by others’ time and knowledge, through recognition, by achieving a sense of belonging, or by gaining back time through efficiency gains. These motivations for contribution (reciprocity, reputation, attachment, and efficiency) in any online community are documented by

⁴ <http://www.onlamp.com/pub/a/onlamp/2007/06/14/why-do-people-write-free-documentation-results-of-a-survey.html?page=1>

Peter Kollack in his paper, *The Economies of Online Collaboration*.⁵

For some, payment is in yet another free, no-cost form. Perhaps you could even go so far as to say that their payment is in happiness. Tara Hunt, author of *The Whuffie Factor* and blogger at horsepigcow.com discusses the happiness factor in a 197-slide deck (offered for free!).⁶ The following four items represent what Tara calls pillars of happiness:

- **Autonomy:** Give people the ability to personalize their experience, offer choices, be open and transparent.
- **Competence:** Let people feel like they're good at what they do.
- **Relatedness:** People want to connect with others in similar situations.
- **Self-esteem:** People who are confident in their knowledge or relationships have self-esteem.

Joining a community

This new collaborative economy will affect technical writers who are paid for documentation. Part of the new role for writers in Web 2.0 is becoming a community member, being a contributor, and being a reader of contributions from other community members.

Community membership is a hands-on activity that you do best when you have practice at it. It is not easy to get experience, but it is necessary. You must read the online arguments (flame wars) and observe other's reactions to know how to handle them better each time they happen. You can observe leadership passing hands and the delegation that occurs. But

⁵ <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/kollock/papers/economies.htm>

⁶ <http://www.slideshare.net/missrogue/happiness-as-your-business-model-414463>

observation does not always teach you how to step into a leadership role or delegate well.

You can learn the ebb and flow of a conversation and become a meteorologist for the “social weather” that’s ongoing in a community. For an example of social weather, do what Clay Shirky writes in his description of the course with the same name at New York University. Simply make some observations next time you walk into a restaurant. Is it noisy or quiet? Slow or busy? Are there couples or groups dining? In a restaurant you have visual and auditory cues to give your inner meteorologist a chance to assess the social weather. In an online community, you need to understand the cues that occur in writing, in emoticons, and in frequency and intensity of updates to content. In the presentation “Blogs and the social weather” at the Internet Research 3.0 conference in October 2002, Alex Halavais describes a deep dive analysis of bloggers’ discourse.

“By measuring changes in word frequency within a large set of popular blogs over a period of four weeks, and comparing these changes to those in the ‘traditional’ media represented on the web, we are able to come to a better understanding of the nature of the content found on these sites. This view is further refined by clustering those blogs that carry similar content. While those who blog may not be very representative of the public at large, charting discourse in this way presents an interesting new window on public opinion.”⁷

While this concept may sound new and exciting, it is quite 20th century. Analyzing newspaper content to determine public opinion was researcher A.A.Tenney’s original concept⁸ in 1912.

⁷ <http://aoir.org/2002/program/halavais2.html>

⁸ Tenney, A. A. (1912). The scientific analysis of the press. Independent 73:895-898.

So what are some ideas for keeping the social weather sunny and clear in a community? Tara Hunt's pillars of happiness are a good set of guidelines for testing your social deliverables for helping users and contributors. When community members can voice an opinion, give an honest review, and build an article or a diagram or a picture or a video, perhaps by taking on a writing role, they feel autonomous and happiness follows. Kathy Sierra calls creating competent users "helping users kick ass," and she has written valuable blog entries about how to do that.⁹ In the area of relatedness, a writer doesn't necessarily have to be a community member to enable people to talk to each other and meet in person more easily. Organizing tweet-ups (in-person gatherings for Twitter users) or user group meetings are an extension of the community manager role, enabling people to feel related to one another. Documentation that enables relatedness, such as helping wiki writers talk to each other via comments or "talk" pages contributes to that pillar of happiness.

I found that after moving OLPC content to the FLOSS Manuals wiki, I still communicated project information via the OLPC wiki at wiki.laptop.org. When I organized the Book Sprint, I used a particular request page on the wiki to invite community members to the event. Volunteers then contacted me through my wiki "Talk" page which sent an email notification to the email address I had designated while still keeping our discussion open for any project contributor to see.

Growing a community

Create guidelines and a central purpose for the community if you are going to grow one organically. For example, some online communities subscribe to one overarching rule: No whining. Others may set a basic rule like: The only dumb question is the one unasked. These two communities will attract different members. Also, after you identify an established community you want to join, realize that it may take a direc-

⁹ <http://headrush.typepad.com/>

tion that you hadn't considered by changing its goals or changing some of its rules or culture.

Rather than trying to single-handedly grow the community, delegate to and recruit from the established community members for tasks that are not in your area.

Communities may have patterns and anti-patterns much like the wiki patterns that Stewart Mader identified in his book of the same name. In online communities, people can block progress on community projects such as coding open source software. For example, someone might offer to address a bug but then doesn't. The lack of follow-through becomes a block for anyone else who wants to make progress on the bug. Lack of documentation can also hamper community efforts. Ever-changing or ambiguous licensing of code may cause a community to abandon it if the license is not easy to use or not in line with the community's vision.

Realize that benevolent dictatorship may not be the correct approach for a community. A benevolent dictatorship usually involves one leader who maintains a stance of always doing what's best for the community, but maintains control over all decisions. Keep a balance as you foster community interaction, especially if you become a leader. Realize that everyone can have a role or several roles at once, both leading and following.

Software management books author Gerald Weinberg once said, "No matter what the problem is, it's always a people problem." Remember that technology layers cannot fix basic trust issues or bad behavior. Rather than adding administration layers, complex access control lists, or even check-ins, talk through the people problems. And if you are the benevolent dictator, be ready to allow the community to self-govern if that is the right direction for it.

Real-world events

One reason people join an online community is the in-person interaction that can happen at professional conferences or networking events. They may join a community related to their profession or to the tools needed for their job, or a community related to a fun recreational interest. It follows that people want to meet others in person at meetings and gatherings. These events not only enable you to communicate with your company's customers; events help the customers meet and talk to each other. User groups and focus groups are examples of real-world meetings that have a single goal in mind. Unconferences, barcamps, and meetups are another type of real-world event where people with similar interests and goals meet to share information. A newly-defined event called a Book Sprint borrows from these camp concepts to create a one-week event of collaborative authoring that generates a book.

Unconferences, barcamps, and meetups

An unconference or barcamp is usually defined by its lack of definition. The morning of the event, attendees gather at one place in front of a white board or poster and offer to share their knowledge in presentations or demonstrations. The unconference has no agenda until session ideas are placed on a white board, often using Post-it notes, in certain time slots so that participants can find sessions to attend. Sometimes a wiki page can help shape the agenda before the event, but the board at the event is the “final” schedule.

A meetup is a prearranged group meeting and the online social networking site meetup.com facilitates organizing those meetings. A combination of meetup and Twitter, a Tweetup is an in-person meeting organized using Twitter for publicity and invites. Sometimes these events are intended for casual entertaining, other times they are organized for professional networking. The main point of these types of gatherings is to take advantage of the higher fidelity conversations that in-person events offer.

How can you plan for such a purposely impromptu event such as an unconference? First you have to realize that the attendees are going to make or break the event. I had little experience with planning an unconference when I was asked to plan one that would take place during the 2008 DocTrain West conference. With the encouragement and help of one person who was certainly going to attend, I was able to grow the invitation list with like-minded individuals. We ended up with some of the most interesting attendees, and one person said it was the most useful session of the conference to him, a compliment considering that the unconference was embedded within a highly valuable conference with a devoted group of attendees.

Book Sprints

A Book Sprint is collaborative authoring, in a short time such as 3–4 months, with the express goal of publishing a book. That sums up the goal of the Book Sprint as devised by Tomas Krag, whose interests lie in the use of technology for developing nations and who was much more interested in the distribution of content and ideas than protecting his rights as an author. Adam Hyde, founder of FLOSS Manuals, was keen to explore the idea of an extreme Book Sprint, which compresses the authoring and production of a print-ready book into a week-long sprint. The first year after the birth of the Book Sprint concept, Adam and FLOSS Manuals experimented with several models of the sprint.

An entire Book Sprints book is available on the FLOSS Manuals website, offering how-to guidance for running your own Book Sprint. This section re-uses some of that content to spread the Book Sprint ideas and concepts as a collaboration technique.

Book Sprint planning

Although the goal of the Book Sprint is to produce a book in one week, the planning of the event often determines its success. This section details some of the planning you should do in advance of the Book Sprint dates. Although a FLOSS Manuals Book Sprint uses the FLOSS Manuals wiki tool, you can use this advice with any collaborative authoring tool.

Scope

What topics will the book cover?

When determining the scope of a book, you might experience a “chicken and egg” scenario. You might want to plan the scope and then invite people to attend, but at the same time you may wonder whether it is better to invite people to attend and then let them decide the scope. Adam Hyde thinks that you can strike a balance. You can decide on the overall topic of a book, such as an existing software product, before inviting anyone. The writers participating in the sprint can then help brainstorm the details of the content. It’s easier to motivate people if they have input early in the process.

Target Audience

Along with the scope comes the target audience, and one decision certainly shapes the other.

Who do you want to read the book? What are the job titles they hold? What organizations or groups do they belong to? Are they students in a college or industry professionals in the workforce? What other publications might they read, or what subject matter should they already be familiar with? What is their general level of computer literacy? What operating systems are they most commonly using?

Answering these questions should also help you identify potential participants in the Book Sprint as writers, editors, or technicians who can serve as subject matter experts.

Ideally, you can include a person from the target audience in the sprint as a document tester. For example, if the target audi-

ence is “newbies,” then invite someone who is new to the product. Instead of trying to imagine the level at which to write the material, you will find more value in having a member of your target audience in the room to look the experts in the eye and say “I don’t understand what that means.” The experts may then have to recalibrate their tone. This is not to say that the target audience member is always right, but the experts have to justify their position when challenged, which leads to better content.

Invitations

An important first decision when planning an event is whether you will select and invite a limited number of attendees or let the attendee list grow by allowing those initially invited to invite others. After you determine your core set of participants, choose a date and location that should work well for most of them. After you set a date and location for the core set of participants, you can open the event up to others.

With the FLOSS Manuals OLPC and SugarLabs Book Sprint, we had a last-minute request to attend the Book Sprint from a journalist located in the UK. Although she didn’t have firsthand experience with the XO laptop, she was interested in the One Laptop per Child project and wanted to attend the Book Sprint in order to write a freelance journalist article about the experience. Although we were intrigued and flattered, we declined her request to attend because we wanted writers who could contribute immediately and also wanted to avoid distractions for the other attendees and participants. It turned out to be the right decision for all involved since we were a very focused group.

Draw up the outline

You perform two types of planning for a Book Sprint: planning the content and planning the event itself.

A topic-oriented, single-sourcing approach to content means that each chapter is a standalone piece of content that

can be reused in many different remixes. This approach also means that the content can be used in a printed book, a PDF file, a collection of browse-able HTML files, or embedded in a website as if it were directly created in that web site. Planning with reuse in mind is important to the success of the sprint.

You should choose reusable content that can be completed in the allotted time for the Book Sprint. Part of the time spent in a Book Sprint is reusing or rewriting what else has been written on the topic. Identifying content that is already written ahead of time is part of your planning process. What books, websites, or wikis already discuss the technology on which Book Sprint focuses? Can you re-use any of that content based on their licensing of the content?

After you have a proposed audience and scope for a Book Sprint, take the time to talk about your ideas with others who are interested in reading the content. Make sure you have buy-in for the audience and scope for which you are planning, and revise as necessary until you feel ready to start outlining the book. In a few Book Sprints, the outline was completed the Sunday just before the week of the sprint.

Reuse existing content

After you have created the outline, you should spend time finding as much existing content as possible. Re-use, re-use, re-use. Search the web and book stores for related content and write to each of the authors asking if you can re-use their content.

If material is available and it is under a liberal license—the same as the one as you want to use—ethical and fair treatment of the content means writing to the authors not to ask their permission but to ask for their “blessing” or endorsement to re-use the content. Many of those authors like to know where their content is re-used, and you might find that you have a new, enthusiastic contributor coming on board as the result of your communication. At the very least they will probably

tell other people about your project and that provides good outreach for you.

Getting existing material is important not just because it can contribute to the total content of the book but because it is motivating for the writers to see that some of the work has already been done before they start. The writers might throw most of it out but by then the content has already had its motivating effect.

Book Sprint logistics

You need to plan the dates, location, and participants in the sprint before you get very far. Either the dates and location are determined by the participants, or who participates will determine where and when the event takes place. In either situation, you need to consider some basic issues. Location and date selection depend on each other because some locations are not going to be available for certain dates. Travel time, distance, and cost as well as visa considerations are also part of the equation. If participants need a visa to come to the U.S. for such an event, at least a month lead time is necessary.

Transportation

How will everyone get there? Will you find the funds for travel or will the participants need to cover some or all of their travel expenses themselves? Travel costs are often the largest expense. The following sections provide an example of the travel expenses for a Book Sprint with about ten to twelve participants in Austin, Texas.

Airfare:

- Airfare from Amsterdam \$1000
- Airfare (for two people) from Boston \$800
- Airfare from Wisconsin \$400
- Total airfare \$2200

Six additional participants were all within driving distance of Austin. We did not have to pay for parking at the host location, and we did not reimburse mileage for driving, which would change the total travel costs.

Car rental:

- Two cars, \$100 per for a week, \$200 total

We did not rent cars for this Book Sprint. Driving people around once they were in Austin was my duty as a host and logistics coordinator, but we could have rented one or two cars (at about \$100 each) for the week and made our lives much easier. Good logistics planning allows writing to be the focus of the week.

Location and other venues

The venue needs to have a single table where everyone can work. The sprinters need ample power sockets (or lots of extension cables), and you need a good Internet connection, preferably wireless. All-hours access to the building or room itself is helpful. Some host locations may want all participants to sign a release so that the host is not liable for damage or injury. Signing a release should be fine—nearly all of the planning is based on good faith in others anyway, so suing when the location is typically donated would be poor form.

Location costs: \$0

Accommodations

Where will everyone sleep? Will they pay for their own accommodation or will you find funds for it? Is the accommodation sufficiently close to the Book Sprint venue so that participants don't waste energy and time traveling every day? Do heavy snorers, smokers, or light sleepers need their own room? Do you need to have a space to prepare and cook meals?

The hotel rate was a corporate rate and in total it was \$1333 for five nights with two of the rooms shared by four partici-

pants. The hotel was within walking distance of the sprint location.

Food

What is everyone going to eat and who will pay for it? Are there any special food requirements? Who is going to make the food? Where will you get the food? Can participants get a quick snack and caffeinated beverages as needed? Is everyone comfortable with alcohol and if so, what do they drink?

The best estimate is based on a per diem for the host city. Austin is \$38 a day using a less expensive corporate rate for example, so the total would be \$950 to provide all the food.

Fun

Is there anything nearby for some fun time out? It's important to let the team spend time together having fun. The Book Sprint is intended to be a fun event that encourages more collaborative efforts long after the intense week is done. The event can be as simple as a cookout or a hike for some sightseeing. Be sure to incorporate fun into the plan. It's important to allow time for relationship building.

Book Sprint budget

For the Austin-based Book Sprint, the costs totaled about \$5000. We raised money by asking for donations from each of the participating organizations (RedHat, OLPC, and Sugar-Labs), and FLOSS Manuals covered the remaining cost.

The total cost is comparable to hiring a contract technical writer for a specific deliverable, yet the results from the collaborative authoring effort generated more interest in the projects, and the quality was quite high.

If there are online communities already, why hold a face-to-face meeting?

In an article published in *STC Intercom* January 2009, titled “Embrace the ‘Un’—When the Community Runs the Event,” Janet Swisher relates a story about the One Laptop per Child and SugarLabs Book Sprint in which she was a participant.¹⁰ While editing, she came across a wiki page that contained an embedded note saying “confirm with Walter”—Walter Bender, founding member of the MIT Media Lab and a fellow Book Sprint writer who has unique first-hand knowledge and experience with the XO laptop created by OLPC. Janet walked over to Walter and asked the question that was listed on the wiki page. Without the in-person nature of the Book Sprint, this interaction may have taken a day or two via email, assuming that Walter could make an email a priority.

Although extroverts prefer an in-person meeting for authoring documentation, there are also good business reasons for enhancing the collaboration and communication by holding an in-person event:

- Forging relationships that will help with ongoing writing projects and information seeking
- Keeping people motivated to continue contributing to the project
- Offering a strategy for updating and maintaining the documentation because a community has been created around both the event and the content itself

The community feeling that you build during a Book Sprint project can carry the momentum from the project forward, giving people the urge to work on the book in coming weeks and leaving them with the feeling they’d like to work together

10 <http://justwroteclick.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/embrace-the-unnoad.pdf>

again in the future. It also creates evangelists for the projects and generates excitement.

Remote contributions to a Book Sprint

Remote participation in a Book Sprint can occur, but it is supplemental to the actual event. In the case of the August 2008 FLOSS Manuals Book Sprint, we had a daily conference call so that remote participants could report their status and any blocks to their writing. We had a constant communication channel open on IRC (Internet Relay Chat). The founder of FLOSS Manuals, Adam Hyde, was always available for technical questions in the sprint room, plus the main FLOSS Manuals developer Aleksandar Erkalovic was at the ready in Croatia to fix or explain any issues we found while sprinting.

The experience of the FLOSS Manuals sprints is that the majority of the work occurs in the “real space” of the sprint. There have been exceptions to this. The *Introduction to the Command Line* sprint held in collaboration with the Free Software Foundation is an example where there were few real-space participants and many remote participants. Whichever way the participation is split, remote contributions are very important, and it’s absolutely necessary to devise a plan to coordinate the real space and remote contributions.

There are excellent tools for assisting with communication for remote contributors. We have used phone conferences (either Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) or “real” phones), but in general these are not as effective for ongoing collaboration as text-based communication. A persistently open text-based chat is good for “ambient” remote communication, and better suited for collaboration with remote participants over a day, a week, or longer. Voice chat seems to put too much focus on immediate activities, and there are often dreary moments when participants are trying to think of something to say.

However, quick conference calls can be very effective to help the real-space Book Sprint team realize that they are not working in isolation and that active, real people somewhere else on

the planet care about what they are doing and want to help. They can give a motivating boost but are not absolutely necessary for coordinating work.

FLOSS Manuals provides the following tools for online communication among contributors: a chat widget online, IRC, email notifications of changes to a topic, and a comparison page showing the changes from one contribution to the next.

Online chat widget

To chat with others while contributing to a book, we have provided a little inline chat window. You can see it on the right of all pages in the WRITE section of FLOSS Manuals website and it is also present in the editing pages. It is a simple mechanism requiring no extra plug-ins to work in your browser. The chat actually works by sending messages to the FLOSS Manuals IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channel. This chat is for communicating briefly about anything that comes to mind. The text format is short, and there is no history or ability to scroll back. The online chat is one chat room; there is no provision (yet) for chatting on a book-specific basis. All comments are out in the open for all to see and remain there until someone else starts a discussion and forces your comments off the page.

For more elaborate conversations that you want to record, or for private messaging, you should use an IRC client when working on open source projects because many participants and subject matter experts use that same tool. For other projects, there may be a preferred enterprise instant messaging tool, or a real-time chat or video capability that you can use. Figure 1 shows the FLOSS Manuals chat widget in action while someone is editing a chapter.

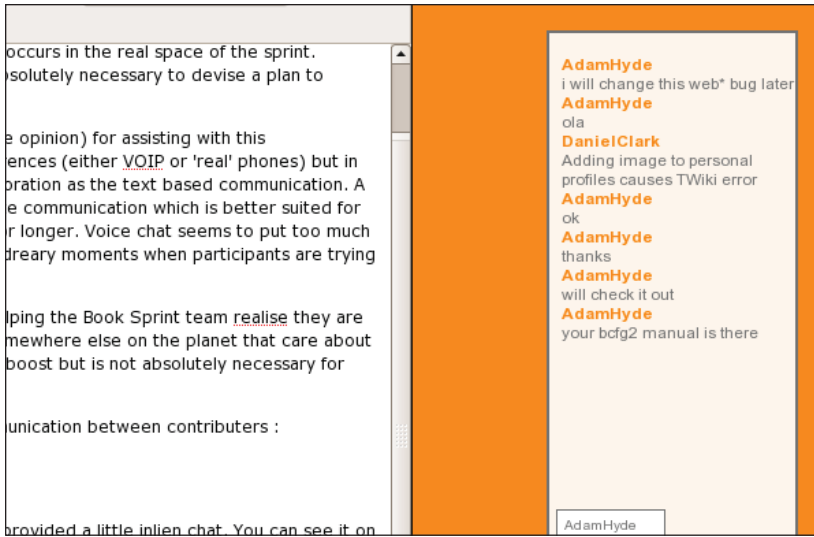


Figure 1: FLOSS Manuals chat widget

IRC (*Internet Relay Chat*)

IRC is an “old school” technology. Its “Channels” are mainly inhabited by geeks, especially free-software geeks. For chat, it’s a good technology because it requires very little bandwidth: if you are on a slow connection it works quite well. IRC chat rooms or channels are contained within “IRC Networks.” FLOSS Manuals uses the Freenode IRC network, one of the oldest and most popular. Anyone can create a chat room on the Freenode network, and the FLOSS Manuals chat room most frequently used is #flossmanuals. The web-based chat mentioned above connects to that main channel.

To use the IRC chat rooms, you need to have an IRC client installed or a browser plug-in installed. The server information is irc.freenode.net. After you connect to the server, you can join a chat room. There are other real-time-chat options available such as Campfire and Etherpad. The persistent, synchronous conversations and discussions groups can have with these tools are extremely valuable when pulling off a Book Sprint.

Notifications

Every book in FLOSS Manuals has an email notification feature and live visual notifications of who is editing. By subscribing to email notifications, you get email every time a change is made in that book. These notifications also link to a “diff” view that shows the recent changes and highlights the differences. Both types of notifications are great during Book Sprints for keeping an eye on who is doing what. If someone changes something you have written, you can see the change and contact them if necessary to discuss the change.

In the editing interface (Figure 2) you can see who is editing any chapter. This view is useful for seeing how much activity is going on but it also helps coordinate contributions.

LINE ART & FLAT GRAPHICS	edit	unpublished	LineArtAndFlatGraphics	MelChua
FIREFOX				
SEARCHING AND SAMPLING	edit	unpublished	Searching	
GIMP				
SCANNING	edit	needs layout	Scanning	
TONAL SCALE	edit	needs images	TonalScale	ChristopherBlount
LAYERING AND COLLAGE	edit	unpublished	LayeringAndCollage	DaveMandl
REPETITION AND CLONING	edit	unpublished	RepetitionAndCloning	JenniferDopazo
NON-DESTRUCTIVE EDITING	edit	unpublished	NonDestructiveEditing	
GRAPHICS FOR THE WEB	edit	unpublished	DigitalOutputForTheWeb	
SCRIBUS				
MULTIPLES: CREATING OF UNITY	edit	needs layout	MultiplePagesUnity	
MULTIPLES: CREATING TENSION	edit	unpublished	MultiplePagesChaosTensionDisarray	PatrickDavison
KOMPOZER				
HELLO WORLD	edit	to be proofed	HelloWorld	
FILES AND SERVERS	edit	to be proofed	FilesAndServers	
SEPARATING FORM AND CONTENT	edit	unpublished	FormAndContentOnTheWeb	AdamHyde
PROCESSING				

Figure 2: Editing notifications

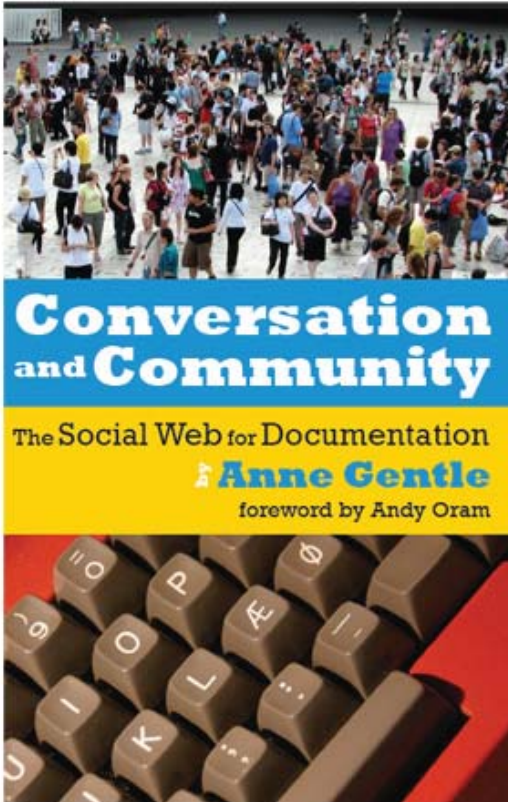
Book Sprints outside of free software

With communication tools assisting the authoring and an authoring tool that enables quick authoring and edits, you can accomplish the goal of a book in five days. IBM has been holding similar in-person events with their RedBooks projects for years. They would give subject matter experts a half-day of training in FrameMaker, have them collaboratively outline a RedBook, and then send them on their separate ways after a week of authoring and in-person discussions. Some RedBooks have moved content into a wiki for internal collaboration.¹¹

Think of an Agile development team with an embedded writer, meaning that a team consists of developers, designers, testers, and writers. Accomplishing a user story about documentation may benefit from the advice given in this section about Book Sprints. The entire team may decide to use a wiki and collaborate on a book-like project for an iteration. You could use your planning day to outline the deliverable, determine the audience, and invite others to share in the fun of accomplishing a book delivery in a time-boxed manner.

¹¹ <http://www.slideshare.net/almondjoy/redbooks-wiki-central-texas-dita-ug-presentation>

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Contents

- 1: Towards the Future of Documentation
- 2: Concepts and Tools of the Social Web
- 3: Defining a Writer's Role with the Social Web
- 4: Community and Documentation
- 5: Commenting and Connecting with Users
- 6: Wikis and Open Documentation Systems
- 7: Finding your Voice

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