

Sprint Beyond The Book: A Collaborative Publishing Experiment

by **Donald T. Hawkins** (Freelance Conference Blogger and Editor) <dthawkins@verizon.net>

At the 2016 SSP Conference (see my “*Don’s Conference Notes*” article in *Against the Grain* v.28#4, September 2016, p. 77-80), I saw a demonstration of a fascinating project, **Sprint Beyond the Book** (<http://sprintbeyondthebook.com>), a collaborative book publishing experiment conducted by the **Center for Science and the Imagination (CSI)**, (<http://www.csi.edu>) at **Arizona State University (ASU)**. In the experiment, several participants discuss a subject and then write essays on it, which are then turned into a published book.

After the conference, I interviewed **Ruth Wylie**, CSI Assistant Director, to get more details on the project and her thoughts on its future. Below is an edited transcript of our conversation.

DTH: *Where did this project come from and how was it started?*

RW: We were not the only ones to come up with the book sprint concept (see <http://www.booksprints.net/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_sprint for other examples). We observed that at many conferences, intellectual and interesting conversations occur, but they are limited to those physically present. Often, after the people involved leave, the thoughts disappear. We started thinking about a way to capture and preserve some of those conversations for the people who might or might not have been part of the conversation. In the book sprint concept, the idea is that we would have a conversation, and then there would be some time after the conversation for participants to capture their thoughts, reflect on the conversation, and record their thoughts for publication in a book.

In our first series of book sprints in 2013, we partnered with people at **Intel** and did a number of sprints around topics related to the future of the book, the future of publishing, the future of reading, and the future of books for education and knowledge systems. We did a sprint at the **Frankfurt Book Fair**, one here in Phoenix, and one at **Stanford University**. At Frankfurt, we had about a dozen authors, including the facilitators from **CSI**. At Phoenix in 2014, we did the future of knowledge systems; there were 30 to 40 people organized into several small groups. There was less hands-on facilitation and more of a small group interaction.

When we were approached by some of the organizers of the **SSP Conference** and asked if we would like to do a sprint at their annual meeting in Vancouver, we were very excited to join them and used the opportunity to expand the sprint format. We experimented with a hybrid model of two groups of “Sprinters”:

1. Invited “Dedicated Sprinters”: professional science fiction authors, professors, or technologists, who came to the conference specifically to participate in the entire book sprint, and
2. “Drop-in Sprinters”: meeting attendees who saw the project, and became interested in participating and contributing to a single chapter or parts of several chapters.

My role was that of a facilitator of the conversation and making sure people were comfortable with the software we were using (I also contributed to one chapter).

DTH: *At SSP, how many people did that work out to be?*

RW: We had 4 dedicated sprinters and 6 sessions with 1 to 4 drop-in sprinters at each one, for a total of around 20 authors.

DTH: *Did the dedicated sprinters contribute to every chapter of the book or just a single chapter?*

RW: They each participated in all 6 sessions, and wrote a piece for the 6 topics. If they felt that one or more of their pieces were not suitable, they could opt to omit them from the final book, but most of them contributed to all of the sessions, giving us a collection of approx-

imately 24 essays. The understanding of the authors, editors, readers, and everyone involved was that we were capturing the intellectual scholarly process; those who were writing pieces served as a memory resource for going back and reflecting on them. The expectation was not to create a perfect piece of writing but more to serve as a reminder for the future.

DTH: *Did the sprinters know the topics before the conference started?*

RW: Yes. Each of the 6 sessions was listed as a concurrent session in the conference program, so they knew what we would be talking about at that time. Nobody came with essays they had prepared beforehand. We had an interesting follow-up conversation with the dedicated sprinters after the meeting, and some of them said that they came with thoughts on what they would write about, but based on the conversation, they ended up writing something else. That showed me that the process was working; the pieces were reflective of the conversation rather than pre-conceived ideas.

DTH: *From my observation, people had a conversation, discussed something, and then they got on their laptops and started to write. Is that accurate?*

RW: Yes, that is exactly how it worked. There was time to share and have debate and conversation, and then time to write. The part that was not as visibly obvious was after the writing part was done, when we sent the pieces that were created in each sprint to our partners at **Cenveo** (<http://www.cenveo.com>). They did some incredibly fast editing for us and returned the pieces in just a few hours. There was time for the sprinters, especially the dedicated ones, to go back and review the edited pieces. We sent emails to the drop-in sprinters letting them

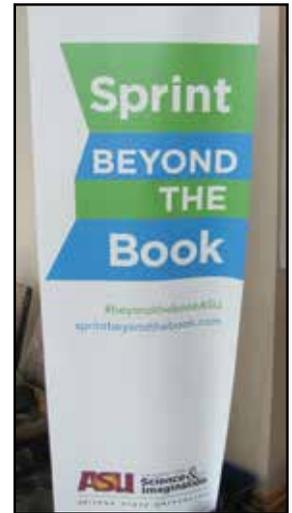
know that their edited work was available and invited them to respond to the edits. Bringing professional editors into the process was something else that we were experimenting with.

DTH: *Did the writers actually go through and check the edits, agreeing or disagreeing with them, and that sort of thing?*

RW: Not all of them did. Part of that checking was done on Friday afternoon immediately after the last conference session and also over the weekend. People really got into this idea, and there was lots of input from the folks at **Cenveo**. It is quite challenging to do these edits, especially when we did not have perfect prose, and the **Cenveo** editors did a fantastic job of embracing our experiment and offering constructive ideas and changes, while recognizing that the time people had to address the edits was quite limited. The **Cenveo** editors worked on individual pieces, asking for clarification and offering suggestions. They are a team of professional editors but had no specific expertise or content knowledge regarding the topics on which we were writing.

DTH: *What is the average length for one of these chapters?*

RW: It is about a page or two. Each chapter was on a theme, and each author wrote about that theme. There are probably about 4 to 8 essays per theme, and each one was between 1 and 3 pages.



Ruth Wylie is seated at the right.

DTH: Does a “theme” mean a session on a specific topic?

RW: Exactly. We had 6 themes: making research matter, the future of the scholarly book, exposing hidden knowledge, human-machine collaboration, expanding access, and shaping the public square.

DTH: You mentioned that some of the dedicated sprinters were science fiction writers. It seems to me that science fiction is a bit removed from scholarly publishing!

RW: Yes! One of the most challenging but also interesting parts about putting together a book sprint is in bringing together the right people for the event. We like to describe it as curating a dinner party — you want to have people with perspectives that will bring out a good conversation. The idea in bringing in science fiction writers and other folks outside of the scholarly publishing community was that they would have different perspectives than people who were attending the meeting and dropping in to write. That would improve the conversation, and perhaps develop new insights and ideas that had not been discussed before.

DTH: How did that work out?

RW: It worked well and is a testimony not only to the science fiction writers but also to the specific authors who were willing to engage in conversation around things that perhaps they had not thought a lot about, listen to things that were being presented, and offer new ideas. Overall it was a good experience.

DTH: So after you got these 6 chapters and took them home what did you do?

RW: It was mostly a compiling process. We did not do anything major with the actual content or editing, but we brought the chapters together, added introductions, and described in a little more detail what the topics were about. We also added some images that were taken at the conference.

DTH: What software did the authors use?

RW: One of our other partners was **Overleaf**, which has a very simple and elegant interface that was used to create LaTeX output. That really helped with the formatting and made the book look like a professional product. The sprinters used the software produced by **Overleaf**, which is a Web-based interface that produces PDF output. Because of all the work that the **Overleaf** staff did in creating a great looking template, we were able to use that for the final product.

DTH: Did the drop-in authors have problems with having to learn new software? Was there a learning curve?

RW: That was something that we were concerned about, but it went very smoothly, which was a credit to the **Overleaf** team. The interface was quite easy to use, and from the perspective of the authors, it was like most other text editing applications. If they had any questions, like inserting an image, bullet points, or something beyond basic text editing, we had on-site representatives from **Overleaf** who were available to assist.

DTH: Did people use their own laptops or did you provide them?

RW: It was a combination of both. If folks had their own laptops, they were able to use them. One of the benefits of using the **Overleaf** software was that it was all accessed on the Web, so nothing had to be downloaded or installed. It was just used through a browser. Of course, not everyone carries a laptop to a meeting like **SSP**, so we provided iPads with keyboards for such people to use when they were participating.

DTH: So then you produced these books, which are really eBooks. Do you have any plans to make printed books from them? What are your plans going forward? Will you sell the books?

RW: We have been considering some different ideas about the outcome, and we have approached some publishers who are very excited about the process and the idea. However, frequently the response is, “We love this idea, but let’s wait and see what comes out of it before moving forward.” Now that we have a product to show, we will see if they would be interested in entering into a more formal publishing arrangement. A lot of our considerations are about keeping the content open access so that people can download and read it for free, but also making it possible for them to get an affordable hard copy if that is their desire.

DTH: Are the results of all the sprints available now?

RW: Yes. Go to sprintbeyondthebook.com and you will see them listed on the sidebar.

DTH: I think you have a very interesting idea here, and it will be interesting to see how it develops going forward. Do you have plans to go to other conferences?

RW: We are always looking. One of the things that made it possible for us to attend **SSP** was the sponsorship we received. In addition to **Overleaf** and **Cenveo**, **JSTOR** also played a role by contributing software to access their Snap database (see <http://labs.jstor.org/snap/>), which provided quick references to related work. Working at a university, we are a small shop, so we are always looking for collaborations to make it possible to broaden and do things like this. We don’t have another conference on the calendar right now but I would invite people to contact me and talk about ways to make this more available.

DTH: How many people do you have working on this project?

RW: In Vancouver, it was just me and our designer, who also did the work after the sprint to bring it all together and put it on the Web. **CSI** is a small shop, led by **Ed Finn**, the Director. I am the Assistant Director, and we have a full-time staff of four plus some students and affiliated faculty members who are working on lots of different projects at the same time.

DTH: What do you think is the future of this project?

RW: I think it is an example of how we are reimagining reading and looking for ways of leveraging technology. Part of that is leveraging the ubiquity of small portable devices

to keep this conversation alive and to broaden the audience of people who are participating. We are constantly looking for ways to bring more people into the conversation and reach a broader audience, and I think the trends are very promising.

One of the things that interested me at the **SSP** meeting was the number of corporation representatives who approached us and asked if we would be interested in doing something like a team-building exercise. That it is something that we would enjoy doing because **CSI**’s mission is to get people thinking more ambitiously and optimistically about the future. The role that books and publishing would play is obviously part of that conversation.

My personal research interests are looking at interdisciplinary collaboration and how to support people with very different backgrounds in collaborating and doing big ambitious projects. This project is a nice example. We had already talked about bringing representatives of the publishing community and authors together. Seeing the results of that is really exciting, and we are always looking for more opportunities.

DTH: I think this is a fascinating project and will follow it with interest. Do you have a newsletter or a way to keep people up to date with what is going on?

RW: You can sign up for a subscription to the newsletter on the **CSI** Website.

DTH: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me. 

*Donald T. Hawkins is an information industry freelance writer based in Pennsylvania. In addition to blogging and writing about conferences for **Against the Grain**, he blogs the **Computers in Libraries and Internet Librarian** conferences for **Information Today, Inc. (ITI)** and maintains the **Conference Calendar** on the **ITI** Website (<http://www.infotoday.com/calendar.asp>). He is the Editor of **Personal Archiving: Preserving Our Digital Heritage**, (*Information Today, 2013*) and Co-Editor of **Public Knowledge: Access and Benefits** (*Information Today, 2016*). He holds a Ph.D. degree from the **University of California, Berkeley** and has worked in the online information industry for over 40 years.*