

The 5-hour-book sprint

September 8, 2014

When I read about the concept of book sprints for the first time, I thought it is a genuinely great idea and that I would love to organize one myself. Last week I finally did, I enjoyed it and I want to share some of my experiences with you hoping that some of you will go out and start something similar yourself in your field of experience.

What is a book sprint?

The [idea of book sprints](#) was developed (and commercialized) by Adam Hyde probably somewhere around 2005. Basically it's a collaborative technique to write entire books with a group of people within 3-5 days. Its process is inspired by the concept of code sprints known from agile software development, where a group of developers meets at the same place (at least usually) and realizes a predefined workload of coding in a predefined amount of time. Analogical in a book sprint, a group of people meets at the same place to produce a book about their common area of interest within less than a week, including conception, writing, editing and distribution.

The 5-hour-book sprint

Last week a friend of mine, [Elisabeth Helldorff](#), and I invited a group of students to her [coworking space](#) to have our first very own book sprint. However, instead of 5 days we decided to start off with 5 hours and see what we can get out of it. The group of students we invited all study in or around Berlin and receive a scholarship by the Foundation of German Industry (which also sponsors my PhD studies) and we therefore decided to write kind of a 'survival kit' for students in the same programme, who are new to Berlin. Our intention clearly was not to produce the most profound content possible, but more to get into the method with a relatively simple topic everyone can easily contribute to.

About a week before the sprint we send an email explaining the method briefly and giving out the topic of the book/broschure we planned to create. At the day of the sprint we went to the coworking space a bit earlier to make some arrangements: We bought some finger food, which is easy to consume at the desk and whilst working – so no time loss through extensive cooking and no stress to deal with dishes etc. Furthermore we arranged the tables in a way that we had one central table to sit around for regular all-hands meetings and several smaller tables all around the coworking space for the individual working groups during the writing process. Finally we set up an [Etherpad](#), a web-based collaborative real-time editor, allowing authors to simultaneously edit a text document, and see all of the participants' edits in real-time – an OSS alternative to the ubiquitous Google Docs.



At 18.00 we met with seven people (less than expected, but this evening the public transport was on strike and it was still in the middle of holidays, obviously bad timing) and followed the schedule below. As we only had 5 hours, we tried to follow the schedule quite pedantic to meet our goal: a final document being ready by 23.00.

The programme

This is how we planned it (and almost how it happened):

- 18.00-18.30: “This is what we will work on and how the sprint will happen”
- 18.30-19.00: “Think about the aspects/topics you’re interested in”
- 19.00-19.30: “Find your topic and form groups (if necessary)”
- 19.30: “Start writing, now!”
- 20.30: “Nibbles in the kitchen, grab some and back to work”
- 22.00: “Preliminary deadline, no more new content from this point on”
- 22.00-23.00: “The last hour is for editing and proof-reading”
- 23.00: “Hard deadline means presentation of the final PDF and distribution on the Web”

Somewhere around 23.30 the deed was done and we were able to immediately distribute [this PDE](#) to the rest of our scholars group in Berlin. We finished our last beer and called it a night.



Book sprint: Intense, entertaining and rewarding

I'm usually rather critical to those reflexive, collaborative, interactive, whatever kind of techniques... but I loved the book sprint. In contrast to many other of these group engagement methods, what's left at the end is not a trashy poster with some colourful bubbles, boxes and arrows but a tangible result you can be proud of. You created something, which in the best case can be useful for others, who haven't participated in the sprint themselves. Another aspect, which surprised me is the degree of high quality communication happening through the sprint. Of course, there are times when it is and should be rather silent whilst working. However as everyone was in one space you could easily walk over to another table and ask any question – and the fact that everyone was using the Etherpad enabled you to see what the others are currently working on and again spurred communication. Our 5-hour-book sprint was an intense experience and I'm looking forward to my next, hopefully even longer one. No go out and sprint!