

The Beginner's Mind

A few of them had stayed on for the postconference tour. Pisa had been Akitschy, but as they sat in a café in Florence outside the Palazzo Vecchio admiring the copy of Michelangelo's *David*, the oohs and aahs about the conference flowed again.

Gretchen Lindquist had talked to Leonardo about the Renaissance-era bishop Marco Girolamo Vida, the focus of her master's thesis. Cris Orfescu explained how Michelangelo appeared fascinated with his nanoart—using naturally occurring and man-made nano structures.

Jim Spath described his favorite conference session—the one about *shoshin*. The session leader had described it as “Beginner's Mind”—a Zen Buddhist concept that refers to wide openness when studying a subject. He said it was associated with a martial arts *dojo*. That seeming oxymoron—openness and self-defense—struck him as a good way to look at the rapid way the world evolves.

The session leader had described several scenarios and asked the class for their “Beginner's Mind” reactions:

1. At the Copenhagen Climate Change summit, you could not have scripted a more unusual meeting as the Associated Press reported:

It was almost unthinkable. The President of the United States walked into a meeting of fellow world leaders and there wasn't a chair for him, a sure sign he was not expected, maybe not even wanted. . . . Along with India, South Africa and Brazil, the key member in the room was China, which recently surpassed the U.S. as the world's top emitter of heat-trapping gasses.¹

Political commentators were full of gossip. Why was the U.S. President doing a deal with the four growing powerhouses that likely will cause the

most pollution in the next few decades? Why did China invite the other three to the meeting without telling the United States? Why were there no chairs ready for the U.S. delegation?

2. Biz Stone, cofounder of Twitter looked a bit startled when, at an industry event last summer, a woman representing Walmart stood up and posed a question that basically said:

I know you are searching for a business model. We may have one for you if you can help us analyze more finely Tweets that mention Walmart. Separate those that reflect customer sentiment from others triggered by a Walmart news item or other more casual mentions of our brand.

Two things were remarkable about that statement. Large enterprises are sold technology; they don't typically—certainly not in open forums—tell vendors that they are open to business. The other was a tacit statement that in the “freemium” model, firms like Twitter were experimenting with consumers may only go so far, but enterprises may be willing to pay for targeted access to those millions of users.

3. David Pogue, who covers mobile and other consumer tech for *The New York Times*, highlighted in a year-end post some of the best new features he saw in mobile devices and cameras in 2009:

- The dock designed for Motorola Droid can suction to the car windshield. Magnetic sensors help fill the screen with Google's GPS navigation application. Another dock for home turns it into a bedside alarm clock and provides weather updates while you charge it overnight.
- The MiFi is a “credit card-size, personal, portable, powerful, password-protected” Wi-Fi hot spot.
- The Nikon's Coolpix S1000pj introduces a built-in projector.
- Can't find your iPhone? On the me.com Web site, you can see where it is on a zoomable map.²

4. Richard Fisher of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said after scientists discovered a mysterious ribbon of hydrogen around our solar system:

The physicists are going to have to go back and figure out what physical processes are being left out of these calculations, and my guess is that within a couple of years, we'll have a pretty good explanation.³

And:

*We thought we knew everything about everything, and it turned out that there were unknown unknowns.*⁴

Spath then walked the group through the instructor's own "Beginner Mind" reactions to each:

1. Why don't we talk much about South Africa as a potential powerhouse? What does Francisco D'Souza of Cognizant think of South Africa as a talent hub? Does that mean we need to get used to the term "BASIC countries"—the new acronym the media coined for the four emerging powers—Brazil, South Africa, India, and China?⁵
2. Is this the business model social computing firms like Twitter have been waiting for? Downplay consumer revenue and advertising models and switch to one that analyzes social media patterns for companies like Walmart?
3. How soon before the next "Jesus-phone" emerges that incorporates *all* these features? At the pace these innovations are coming out, how soon before David Pogue turns such a column into a weekly, not an annual, ritual?
4. Which businesses will benefit from a period of *increased* sunspot activity expected in 2012?

As the cappuccino flowed, the group provided their own *shoshin* reactions to each of the scenarios.

Spath continued: "The session got me thinking: Could we take the principles we have learned in the SAP SDN community and apply it to broader innovation? To me, that is my "Beginner's Mind" reaction to the conference. That form of Open Innovation"

Marilyn Pratt jumped in: "What a great idea! Let's discuss it on the next SAP Mentors call. By the way, my favorite session was that on cyber ethics. I had really enjoyed all the passion and debate around biofuels in Florida and about Google's ethics. I would like to take discussion of ethics scenarios also to a community format."

Craig Cmehil, who had joined them for the weekend, merely said, "Sweet!" as he thought about how his new leaders at SAP might use *shoshin* as they tried to reinvent the German software house.

In another realm, Michelangelo looked down and saw the Piazza della Signoria grow more crowded with tourists, and he turned his attention back to reinterpreting *David* in nanoart. Then he sighed that six centuries later he still had to worry about masterpieces Leonardo might create in this new art form.