

Code and cookies: Learning web scripting with PHP

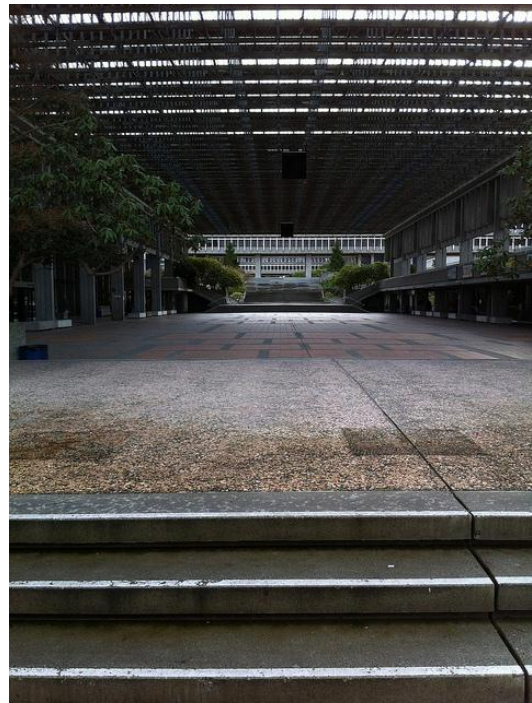
By Kathryn Lindsay.

In February, a group of keen people in the library field braved the cold and rainy weather atop Burnaby Mountain to gather for a two day programming workshop. The BCLA Continuing Education Committee organized the workshop: 'Introduction to web scripting with PHP' which was held from February 16 to 17, in the Bennett Library at the Simon Fraser University Burnaby Campus. If you are wondering what PHP is, you are probably not alone! It is a popular computer scripting language that is often used for web development. The acronym PHP is actually recursive and stands for 'PHP Hypertext Preprocessor'.

The workshop

We were very lucky to have two experienced programmers present the class: Mark Jordan, Head of Library Systems at Simon Fraser University and John Durno, Head of Library Systems at the University of Victoria. Mark and John aimed the workshop at beginners and so the first day started with the basics: an overview of web concepts and technologies, and a little theory on the practice of programming. Next we learned about tools that would allow us to set up a development environment on our own computers: a free and open source cross-platform application called [XAMPP](#), which combines a web server, PHP and other tools in a single package, and the text editor: [Notepad++](#). We were then ready to write our first PHP scripts, and began with a classic 'hello world' style program that simply displayed the text 'Hello Web!' on a webpage. It was a humble beginning, but by the end of the second day, with lots of encouragement from John and Mark, we had all created a feedback form for a website.

We took ample breaks to refuel with snacks and coffee, and share our programming experiences. I especially enjoyed the thematic snack of chocolate-chip cookies that was provided after we finished the topic of session cookies! Other topics the workshop covered include: built-in functions, debugging and security. You can work through the course in your own time as it is available online at: <http://interoperating.info/courses/introphp/> and is licensed under a [Creative Commons License](#).



Simon Fraser University, Photo by Kathryn Lindsay.

The coders

The workshop participants were an enthusiastic and supportive group from a range of backgrounds including library web masters interested in using PHP with content management systems such as Drupal, cataloguers exploring the possibility of using scripts to batch process MARC records, as well as librarians, such as myself, with a general interest in programming. I have a background in software engineering, but had not previously programmed in PHP, so found the introduction useful. I moved to Vancouver from Melbourne, Australia in December 2011 and as a newcomer to BC I valued the opportunity to meet fellow BCLA members.

Code Year

Several of the workshop participants are learning another programming language: JavaScript, via an initiative from [Code Academy](#) called [Code Year](#). Each week Code Academy releases new JavaScript

exercises which you can complete in a web browser. As you complete the exercises you earn points, unlock badges and can discuss your progress using an online forum. It's not too late to join in the fun! You can sign up online at: <http://codeyear.com/>.

Participants have also held meetings called [meetups](#) in cities all over the world. Two Lower Mainland meetups have been organized this year, one in February at the Terry Salman branch of the Vancouver Public Library and another in March at the Tommy Douglas branch of the Burnaby Public Library.

To support those of us in the Lower Mainland wanting to learn code, May Chan, from Burnaby Public Library, has been organizing [the meetups in Vancouver](#), but feel free to initiate a Code Year meetup of your own at your workplace or local public library. Anyone can organize a meetup.

Next coding workshop: Perl

If you are interested in scripting you should consider attending the next BCLA Continuing Education Committee workshop: 'Introduction to Data Manipulation Using Perl'. Mark Jordan and John Durno are also presenting this workshop and will cover basic but useful techniques for manipulating the most common data formats encountered in library work: delimited, MARC (MACHINE READABLE CATALOGING) and XML (EXTENSIBLE MARKUP LANGUAGE). By the end of the course, participants will be able to use Perl to work with simple examples of the above data types. For more details and registration, see: <http://www.bcla.bc.ca/perl>. It would be great to meet you there.

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