British Columbia
Library Association
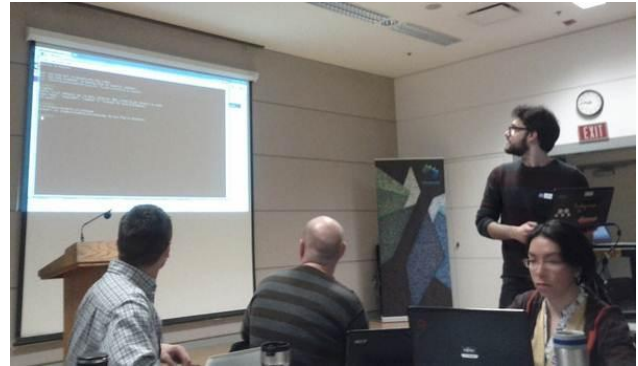
Datacamp for library people

By Maryann Kempthorne, Camp Counselor for #datacamp.

The question of how libraries can become curators and places for the public to use open data was up for discussion at recent conferences in B.C., including the Open Data Learning Summit and the Changing Times: Inspiring Libraries conference. On March 15th, participants with a background in libraries, education, and information technology met at the Vancouver Public Library for a half day un-conference to extend the conversation and target open data literacy among library people.

Prior to datacamp, BC Libraries Co-operative invited participants to submit ideas of what they would like to learn. The call for ideas provided thirty issues to tackle for open data via the library. Eight ideas were shortlist for data campers to work through on the day.

Camp attendees were grateful for demo from Alex Garnett, Data Curator of SFU's Research Data Repository. Throwing Good Data After Bad: How to Turn Something that Hardly Passes for "Data" into Real Usable Stuff! Jammed on the potential of Python to utilize Geocode APIs, Alex stacked a table of 20 library-oriented coders to look at building new datasets from library information sources. Veteran library staff to recent grads offered strong new directions in working with linked open data and coding at the library.
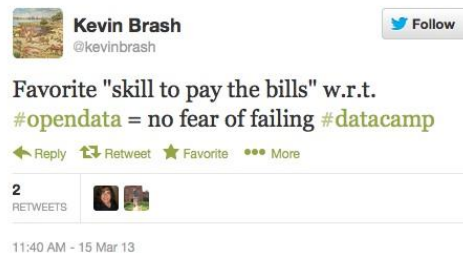
Other conversations sought the best practices and practical examples for using open data in public libraries. Jay Peters and Kathleen Wyatt from Coquitlam Public Library led a discussion on how, and when, to bring experts into libraries to make data work as well as considerations around open publication of libraries' data.

Alex Garnett at Datacamp. Photo by Franklin Sayre.

Conversation from frontline staff to administration assessed the language & promotion of Hacker Culture. Trish Mau of Burnaby Public Library shared the table with a number of campers from Vancouver School Board and elsewhere on whether the language is holding us back. Are we ready to hack? How do we make the open data movement more inviting, less intimidating, and ensure we're engaging thinkers of varying technical abilities?

Key themes refined themselves in further work of camp teams around The Skills to Pay the Bills for Libraries with Respect to Open Data? Led by West Vancouver Memorial Library's Kevin Brash and Sarah Felkar, this discussion stressed importance of numeric data literacy skills, critical thinking, and the ability to learn.

Kevin Brash
@kevinbrash

Favorite "skill to pay the bills" w.r.t.
#opendata = no fear of failing #datacamp

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As for libraries own metrics, the University of British Columbia's Eugene Barsky brooked the conversation on how Visualization Tools Make a Difference, and I led a discussion on Library Metrics for Service Shift.

Liam Arthurs from the Ministry of Education shared with participants from public and school libraries steps to running a successful Hackathon. Interest sparked discussion around how the document can be used in library programming and offered a good opportunity for feedback on support campers would need in order to bring a Hackathon together in their library.

Camp Counselor May Chan of BCLA's Continuing Education Committee was concerned with whether current qualifications meet needs around working with open data, and wondered about what will assist with developing that skill set. #datacamp located a committed network that can foster skills library staff realistically need. Informed by the world wide MOOC movement and shepherded by adult educators like Camp Counselor Kevin Stranack, we tried out a BC library-styled version of Mozilla Web Literacies and looked to learning like Codeacademy. Camp participants urged that open data routinely be added to the work of library conferences, library directors' meetings, and in the Commons space of Libraries and Literacy, Ministry of Education.

Libraries are set to move from spaces for information and media consumption to places of creation. Identifying emerging opportunities and building both our capacity and community capacity requires refreshing traditional concepts of library. Libraries are proving themselves to be locally-focused while open to the world, daring and ever adaptable, but true to the long-held values of learning, knowledge sharing, open access, and community service.

One of the most important outcomes for #datacamp was to bring together a diverse community of librarians, educators, and technologists to get to know one another, share their stories, and build a network to shift library from information centres towards more data expertise. At wrap time many of us agreed we may have not answered every question or issue but we felt better connected to people who can help us find answers. We'll be doing this again soon … and invite anyone to join in and learn with us. Many of the group can be found on this twitter list.

For more information on datacamp and open data resources, visit http://bc.libraries.coop/open/tools.

Maryann Kempthorne is the Access and Learning Specialist for the BC Libraries Co-operative.