

# How I hacked myself at Code4Lib 2013

By May Chan.

This year I had the privilege of attending my first ever Code4Lib conference, held February 11-14, 2013 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Most of the 380 attendees were from the U.S. and Canada, with a few from Japan and Europe. The schedule included a day of preconference sessions, and two and half days of conference programming that packed in opening and closing keynotes, 23 presentations, and a daily slate of lightning talks and breakout sessions. Dinners and social activities were also organized to facilitate connections. Overall, the conference was well organized and thoughtfully planned to accommodate a wide variety of needs and backgrounds.

Attending Code4Lib 2013 was a profound and life changing experience, impacting me personally and professionally. The conference significantly altered my philosophy and approach to learning. I came away from Code4Lib encouraged and inspired. Unexpectedly, I came away feeling like I found my own kind. And most importantly, I came away enlightened, with some false perceptions about myself and stereotyping tendencies exposed. In short, the Code4Lib conference offered an environment where I got to hack myself.

Hacking myself at Code4Lib was a continually formative process, involving a series of events, encounters, and realizations that built on each other throughout the conference. Here are three of the most noteworthy self-hacks:

## “It’s what I make out of it.”

My first hackfest ever was a preconference session that began negatively for me. The group leader talked too much at length in technical jargon, which I found frustratingly exclusive. Feeling inadequate and discouraged, I was tempted to walk out. That the other participants seemed to understand what they needed to do only added to my feelings of inadequacy. The fellow on my left, however, caught my attention because he was typing purposefully in fits and starts. I glanced over his shoulder, and to my surprise, I saw that he was simply looking up tutorials and reading documentation. It then dawned on me that the least I could do was read. Since observing this person gave me ideas on how to move forward, I continued to shadow him. Before long, I found the bits of code I needed to get started and eventually

carved my own path. My first hackfest taught me that I am entirely responsible for my own learning. I also realized that when things get tough, I default to blaming or making assumptions about others rather than taking responsibility for myself.

## “Collaborative learning is contagious.”

Making the most of the hackfest required me to put aside initial distrust of the group leader and accept him for what he could offer. And though I had to persist with getting his attention, he eventually came around and wrote a helpful line of code for me. With some ability to recognize logical patterns, I started to see how the structure of the code worked.

I was so excited about connecting the dots that the woman next to me expressed curiosity, giving me an opportunity to practice explaining newfound knowledge. Then another participant across the table said to me, “You look like you know what you’re doing. Can you show me what you’ve got?” The irony was not lost on me. Clarifying that I was in fact a novice, I was only too happy to pass on that line of code. She used it differently than I did, which gave me additional insights about it. The process and outcome of our interaction astonished me. I had arrived at the hackfest knowing nothing, but ended up being part of someone else’s learning, which in turn fed back into mine.

## “Cataloguers ≠ MARC format.”

It was not a little a daunting for me as a cataloguer to attend a library technology conference that actively showcases cutting edge projects and solutions. The fear was that everything would be over my head, that as a “traditional” cataloguer, I had no business in attending Code4Lib. But this was not the case, and in fact quite the opposite. There were a fair number of sessions I was able to engage meaningfully in. I was especially encouraged by the choice of Gordon Dunsire to give the closing keynote. The theoretical grounding I’ve received and experience gained as a cataloguer proved to be invaluable and highly relevant. While there is a definite need to develop new competencies, skills and aptitudes, I also saw how existing ones were readily transferable to metadata creation and management. Cataloguers are **not** synonymous with the MARC format.

### Code4Lib BC

A Code4Lib regional group for BC library folks formed this past summer, with the view to plan an “unconference” event with lightning talks and breakout sessions. This event will be taking place at SFU Harbour Centre on November 28-29, 2013. I was thrilled to be included in the planning. Because my experience with Code4Lib was so positive, I am motivated to “pay it forward” and serve as a bridge to the BC cataloguing community.

Given my background, I am invested in seeing more cataloguers recognize that their skills and aptitudes cultivated from applying traditional standards are highly transferrable as we move towards a linked data environment. I would also love to see more cataloguers learn to apply “computational thinking” to their work, acquire basic coding skills, and gain

familiarity with web standards. These competencies would enable cataloguers to collaborate with their colleagues in IT departments more effectively. With these hopes in mind, I am pleased to see that BCCATS is a sponsor to the upcoming event. This support comes from a sizeable group of BCLA members and signals a timely openness from the BC technical services community to build on and reach beyond our current expertise.

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