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Collaborating on Code at an Unconference: Review of Code4Lib Midwest 2017

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Cover Page Footnote

Jim Craner is the Development & Operations Manager for The Galecia Group. A former Code for America Fellow and Ameri-corps volunteer, he has extensive experience building websites and mapping applications for libraries and nonprofit organizations. He can be reached at jim@galecia.com.

Technology Matters

Collaborating on Code at an Unconference: Review of Code4Lib Midwest 2017

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Code4Lib (<https://code4lib.org/>) is an online community of programmers and technologists within the library community, founded in 2003. Within a few years, the community began organizing national and regional events for librarian technologists, with a wide array of topics. I recently attended the Code4Lib Midwest 2017 regional meeting, hosted by digital service librarians at Loyola University Chicago's Klarchek Information Commons.

You're probably familiar with open source software – software written collaboratively and shared in open communities. In fact, many libraries run on open source integrated library systems, such as Koha or Evergreen. But the programmers, developers, and designers working in libraries are collaborating on more than just software.

As an “unconference,” or participant-driven event, even the content sessions were collaboratively planned and delivered by the attendees. After registering for the event, attendees were invited to a shared wiki where we could list topics that we wanted to discuss, presentations or talks that we'd like to lead, or demos that we'd like to present. In the days leading up to the event itself, an interesting agenda took shape, covering a wide array of topics.

With approximately 50 attendees present, primarily from academic institutions throughout the Midwest, we convened in a wired conference space overlooking Lake Michigan. The

group was the perfect size for a sharing session, so we each introduced ourselves and our projects and described a recent successful project or accomplishment and a recent struggle or challenge. Sharing as a group allowed us to note people working with similar technologies or on similar projects. Relationships began there that would grow over the next two days of collaboration and cooperation. This sort of community-building within the event is a hallmark of a successful unconference.

Both days of the event consisted primarily of presentations, panel-driven discussions, and breakout sessions. Almost half of the attendees presented something – many via a “lightning session,” a timed 5-minute long demo or presentation on a particular software tool or topic. (We also had lunchtime “dine-arounds” and an after-hours social event to discuss topics both technical and non-technical, of course!)

One of the most common types of presentations offered was an overview or recap of a recent technology project. Several attendees presented technical deep dives into the planning and implementation phases of various technology systems in their respective libraries – and nearly every session ended with a vigorous Q&A. Some of the topics included:

- A review of the process of implementing a modern unified search experience for a large university library system (Jon Earley, University of Michigan). This included a de-



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tailed presentation on the various search repositories, discovery layer, and a review of the user experience improvements made.

- A review of the process of migrating from Omeka (<https://omeka.org/>) to Scalar (<http://scalar.usc.edu/scalar/>) for digital collection publishing (Matt Krc, Newberry Library). Both Omeka and Scalar are open source tools used by libraries, museums, and other institutions to publish digital media collections. The presenter described the use of Omeka at his library and a recent project to move some collections to Scalar to take advantage of some of the new features. He also spent some time illustrating the differences between the two titles, such as the increased flexibility that Scalar offers designers building a compelling user experience with a greater focus on images.
- A presentation on digitizing fifty years of Chicago building permits, an invaluable trove of historical data (Tracy Seneca, University of Illinois at Chicago) addressed the challenges of preserving the physical media and focused on the information potential of the collection if it can be digitized in a data-friendly manner. She discussed similar projects conducted by the New York Public Library's media lab including an open source tool for setting up crowdsourcing efforts to transcribe handwritten historical records.
- A presentation on a pilot project to add linked data to a media archive (Tod Olson, University of Chicago). Linked data refers to presenting data in a structured, standardized way so that it can be queried in useful ways. In this case, an existing archive of historical images was enhanced with linked data about their provenance, physical properties, photographic subjects and topics. This presentation included a thorough review of the entire process of cataloging,

transforming, and publishing the linked data along with valuable tips and lessons learned.

- Another interesting presentation was actually outside the scope of what one typically considers a technical topic: an editor from the national Code4Lib Journal (<http://journal.code4lib.org/>) spoke about the process of soliciting content and producing their quarterly topical journal. The journal is notable for its collaborative volunteer editorial process – and the editor solicited applications for other participants to join the collaborative editing team. As mentioned earlier, the larger organization is pretty non-hierarchical and community-driven: volunteers create and edit all of the interesting content.

It wasn't all presentations and discussion by any means – those of us that attended the "Building a Site with Jekyll" breakout workshop got our hands dirty with some coding. Led by Kate Flynn and Allan Berry, this workshop guided us through the installation and basic use of Jekyll, a Ruby-based static website generator.

And some sessions were just plain fun! Andrew Bullen of the Illinois State Library played audio for us that was computer-generated by OCR-scanning historical sheet music archives from the Pritzker Military Museum—some of which hadn't been heard in nearly one hundred years.

Like any conference, much of the learning and sharing takes place in the hallways, while standing around the coffee table between sessions, and in the social events after hours. The number of attendees and the collaborative nature of this event fostered countless conversations, many of which will continue online until next year's event. After attending such a rewarding event, I for one, am looking forward to next year's Code4Lib 2018 national conference!



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