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Why the information profession needs Library Carpentry

By Clare Playforth
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I want to express how important I think software skills are for people who work in libraries and how I feel like more value should be placed on their development. We are in the business of information, creating it, archiving it, retrieving it, curating it and delivering it, so it is a constant source of mystery to me that we are often so bad at working with the systems, processes and software that enable this.

I accept that there are many different reasons that you might want to work in the information profession (you know like those weird folk who say “I’m a people person”) but whichever way you look at it, information is the uniting factor – information technology and information as in data. We all want to provide good customer service but in my experience people seem slow to accept that the more library workers know about how to use and exploit software and information technologies the better the customer is going to be served. A massive chunk of user interactions with any library will be through the catalogue, databases, web pages and self service and yet often these digital user experiences are not seen as being as important as the face to face ones and I think that the development of staff skills in these areas could benefit from greater investment.

In the past colleagues have commented on how ‘techy’ I am and I always think well yes, so should you be, we work in the information profession and it’s our duty to be ‘techy’ for the sake of providing a decent service to our users. My personal jam is obviously anything to do with data because I’m a cataloguer but there are many different areas that a university library worker for instance might be interested in or might specialise in and most of them will have information technology at their core. Teaching: we have a duty to help researchers find and organise their own information and so we must be serious about learning the most effective ways to use software to this end. Data archiving: we need to be efficient, secure and ethical in the ways in which we store research data in our institutional repositories, we need to understand how to use and select the right technologies to do this. Online user experience: we need to make sure the environments we create in our webpages are user friendly and intuitive as well as being inclusive. Cataloguing: we must ensure our metadata is clean and consistent so people will get the correct results when searching for resources.

So anyway it’s not really my intention to add my voice to the ‘All librarians should learn to code!’ narrative because I don’t think we need to go that far, leave that to the programmers. I do, however, want to make a similar suggestion: one that goes something like ‘All librarians should attend Library Carpentry!’

The Library Carpentry events were a set of workshops run in November 2015 funded by the Software Sustainability Institute and hosted by City University. The programme was inspired by Software Carpentry and James Baker adapted
and organised the workshops to make them especially relevant for librarians. He further explains the rationale in his blogpost, which also summarises what we actually got up to in the sessions. The lesson plans and other materials for each week can be viewed on the Library Carpentry GitHub pages. The topics were:

Week 1: Basics (Regular Expressions). Week 2: Controlling Data (with the Shell). Week 3: Git. Week 4: Open Refine

I found the whole experience highly valuable and judging by the flurry of activity and issues raised on GitHub by the other participants I’d say we all got a lot out of it. Not just in a C.V. enhancing, networking, professional development kind of way but in a properly useful way in that we learnt actual skills that could be applied to actual use cases in our actual jobs. I’m incredibly grateful to all those who made these workshops possible and put so much time and energy into them. Despite being 7 months pregnant and a London Underground hater I knew after the first session that having to drag myself up to the big smoke on four cold, dark, Monday evenings after work was a tiny price to pay for what was a brilliant and inspiring bit of learning. I hope for the sake of other information professionals everywhere that Library Carpentry will become a ‘thing’ and that many others (not just the techies) will get the chance to attend similar events.