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Forming a Cross-site Technical Learning Community

Led by Jim Farnam

Notes by Simone Zhang

Present: Lisa Sparrow, Mike Carnathan, David Epstein, Alyssa Sylvaria, Patricia Auspos, Jim Farnam, Todd Clausen, Phyllis Betts, Steve King, Eleanor Tutt, Mike Schramm, Michael Barndt, Travis Reid

Jim Farnam – We’ve been developing this one piece of software called Weave. We realized it doesn’t do everything we want it to. So we’re not really recognizing our full potential as a collaborative. We don’t get together. We’ve realized we’re independently doing the same JavaScript tasks. Perhaps we can come back together in some way to share code? One idea for this session might be to get at a best way for things to be organized. I’m also interested in needs for technical presence. It’s not just about tools, but also about design.

Mike Schramm – How do you keep people paid from a staffing perspective? What about putting all your eggs in the same basket?

Jim Farnam - How many of you have programming capability on staff? (9 raise their hands)

Mike Schramm – I think it’s useful to begin to categorize these things. We avoided the million dollar web site and now we’re interested in data delivery over the web now that we have a variety of options. What we did do was develop a lot of tools for quickly developing products for individual organizations. We got very efficient at providing a time series set. That meant we could do a lot of personalized service. There’s a direct upfront cost. I’ve never seen NNIP work being good at one level – interested in Providence working together with Pittsburgh to find a solution. Particularly at the small level – quick and dirty solutions in Excel.

Jim Farnam – the tools could go beyond tech tools. You could have formulas for combining ACS data.

Todd Clausen – If we have a location online somewhere, everyone who’s a programmer could look at X code. You could read it.

Jim Farnam– DataHaven is writing all these scripts for things that we’re going to put up on GitHub.

Eleanor Tutt – If I’m looking at doing ACS analysis in R, I don’t know who the people who have expertise in this are. I don’t know that they have the same policy. We could have a review system.

Mike Schramm – This problem exists not just in the world of code. Max’s presentation is a good example. We’ve spent a lot of time thinking about standardizing bank locations and names.

David Epstein – For me, we’ve talked about our technologies. But also how people are structuring. It matters how people are structuring their tables to continue to upload and maintain this.

Jim Farnam – For two years, we’ve been talking about a process that’s agnostic to Weave. We had communication across data structures. Together there are different structures for different purposes. What’s the best thing for what we want?

Mike Carnathan - I think we should do something like a CKan. Socrata and CKan are hard to set up but may have data to draw from.

Jim Farnam – That goes a step beyond what we’re talking about. It’s a technological solution to data storage. Having some national and local data in one system. Kathy started talking about a discussion on tools and links to their web site. We could potentially have some interactive documentation.

Eleanor Tutt - Another related question. For people who are using portals, how are you servicing this?

Michael Barndt - Content management in general 1) for people in your organization, and 2) for those outside. We have a state data center. The state center does a lot of state data generation. Maybe NNIP should have a conversation with the state data center network. They do storage and dishing.

Has Urban developed a contract with a statistics consultant, with ACS? Would be helpful to have someone to begin to understand the statistical issues. That may apply in other cases.

Mike Schramm – We spent a lot of time translating to local geographies. If Urban were to recreate a platform, we need to have a method to do local processing.

XX –It’s about the processing spelled out clearly. For example, the five minutes of what New Orleans is doing [as presented in their Ignite presentation]. It would be helpful to have those steps. We tend when we do webinars to not get enough into the weeds to actually help each other figure out how to do things.

Jim Farnam – IN OIC, we have different users group. We had people answering all these questions. Something like a repository to question. Do we have anything like a technical user list?

Mike Schramm – It might make sense to subset NNIP from technical NNIP. Maybe a day before the normal NNIP meeting, maybe we should talk about specific technology. Instead of Ignite, it would be the step by step how to do the thing you were just talking about. How Grand Rapid has shared with Detroit, etc. One of the things we’re trying to use is a data platform that can be deployed.

Jim Farnam – The demand for such information might be greater than NNIP. Do we want to expand it? It’s sort of an open source question.

XX - I work with St Louis County and I’m amazed and I’m very impressed by the work. I don’t know who that would be a lift for in the Exec Committee.

XX - Isn’t that philosophically what we want to do?

Todd Clausen – We’ve got to really talk this through. We have a web site that’s being improved. But there are things that are just in the partner sections. Unfortunately, something like this would probably be a partner’s-only thing. That’s the challenge.

Jim Farnam – But that could be an NNIP-sponsored tool.

Michael Schramm - One simple step might be to take the last several conferences and edit the Ignite session and create a YouTube directory. We could have an annotated set of Ignite sessions. I think the real distinction between public private is not about inside/outside, but what’s under development and what’s ready to share.

Alyssa Sylvaria – User testing in terms of tools is really useful because we’re all creating very similar public facing tools. Geographically our audiences will be different, but our target audiences would be similar.

David Epstein – Somewhat related to what we’re discussing. A hacker community in one location could start something that others in different places could then build up.

Jim Farnam – In some sense, one thought is: do we come under the NNIP as OIC? Or under CIC? But they are far less sophisticated. Then there are the open planning tools where place matters. But we haven’t even talked to them yet. How do we bring them together?

Mike Carnathan – May be a good idea to survey the network on development, cross-site technological development.

Eleanor Tutt – I want to put a plug for the open approach. It’s been harder for us to spread the great work we do. Emily from Sunlight was saying there’s a lot of great work that hasn’t bubbled up to national organizations.

XX - It seems like a self-evident problem. If you exclude non-NNIP partners, you lose out on a lot of lot of opportunity such as collaborating online. We’re small and we’d like to learn from other people’s mistakes. We want to share all of the code. We just don’t have a great place to do that.

Todd Clausen – It’s a challenge, you have to realize it’s not a full time program at Urban. We used to have regular webinars to bring people together. But that’s a real challenge. Maybe one way that non-partners can stay in touch is to join our Google Group. There are going to be some transitions there. But that Listserv’s pretty quiet compared to a few years ago. Unfortunately what we saw was that we had a bunch of really good technological conversation, but people started complaining about getting too many emails. Maybe we need to take advantage of the tools we already have to bring a wider group of participants into the fold. Maybe we need a separate listserv.

Jim Farnam – If we package it right, would it be possible to get grant funding to support staff time at UI for webinar, etc.?

Mike Barndt – The distance work has been really low boil. As much as we’d wish for long distance work to work, it’s a real challenge. One of the problems is that so few of us come from any given city. There must be some technologists who don’t make the trip. There was a pattern of having specialized meetings, not just of NNIP. Early in GIS, there was a mapping meeting. Early use of PDAs. So you had this entire two days that was not limited to NNIP in focus. NNIP used to put them together. But if there were high opportunity specialized meeting that would be great.

Jim Farnam – Or you could test out special virtual webinars

Mike Schramm – Before Minneapolis, we had a specialized foreclosure meeting. After that, we went on with the standard NNIP topics. If we do something like that we should do it in the east coast.

United Way Newark - On the listserv: UW has listervs. For us, we’re new to the idea of trying to get all the data in one place. We split up listservs by topic. Education, income, etc. Beginner, intermediate, advanced. I think that’s absolutely necessary. We’re not NNIP partners but being here and having access to people who have access to data could help change the trajectory of how we serve our community.

Closing Remarks:

* I hear a consensus that people want a better mechanism to share technical expertise
* Perhaps there could be an Exec Committee work group to refine this idea?
* Survey the network? Todd Clausen – we need to figure out how to unofficially do that. We have a lot of surveys already in the pipeline.

Todd Clausen- Our function is to figure out what you want

David Epstein – We can all decide to use the listserv for more technical discussion.

Todd Clausen - I would just urge that we don’t build more than we need. Let’s maybe create this technical version of the listserv.

Travis Reid – Maybe you could try to just get 10 people on the phone for 10 minutes, rather than typing survey responses.

Todd Clausen – That’s another thing we could do. It would be great if a UI person didn’t have to coordinate it, if someone could volunteer to do a webinar or something.

United Way – How do you access the Google Group?

Todd Clausen – We’ll have Kathy share that.

Jim Farnam – Open Knowledge Foundation, every two weeks they have a Google Hangout where you actually see the faces of people. Maybe we could do something like that every two weeks? Who shows up, shows up. That could be an ongoing thing.

Todd Clausen – That’s great. We could have some structured Hangouts, some ad-hoc.