

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

A collaborative research project to evaluate and provide sustainable recommendations for our digital preservation programmes

Breaking through with Library Carpentry

Posted on **19 January, 2018** by **Dave Gerrard**

Thursday 11th January saw the Cambridge University Library's annual conference take place. This year, it was entitled 'Breakthrough the Library', and focused on cutting-edge innovation in libraries and archives. I can honestly say that this was the first ever conference I've been to where every single speaker I saw (including the ten or so who gave lightning talks) were absolutely excellent.

So it's hard to pick the one that made the most impression. Of course, an honourable mention must go to the talk about [Jasper the three legged cat](#), but if I had to plump for the one that was most pertinent to moving Digital Preservation forward, I'd have picked "Library Carpentry: software and data skills for librarian professionals", from Dr James Baker of the University of Sussex.

I'd heard of the term 'Library Carpentry' (and the initiatives it stems from – Software Carpentry and Data Carpentry) and thus had an idea what the talk was about on the way in. Their web presence explains things far better than I can, too (see <https://librarycarpentry.github.io/>), so I'm going to skip the exposition and make a different point...

As a full-blown, time-served nerd who's clearly been embittered by 20 years in the IT profession (though I'm pleased to report, not as

much as most of my long-term friends and colleagues!), I went into the talk with a bit of a pessimistic outlook. This was because, in my experience, there are three stages one passes through when learning IT skills:

- Stage 1: I know nothing. This computer is a bit weird and confuses me.
- Stage 2: I know EVERYTHING. I can make this computer sing and dance, and now I have the power to conquer the world.
- Stage 3: ... er – hang on... The computer might not have been doing exactly what I thought it was, after all... Oops! What did I just do?

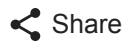
Stage 1 is just something you get through (if you want – I have nothing but respect for happy Stage 1 dwellers, though). If so inclined, all it really takes is a bit of persistence and a dollop of enthusiasm to get through it. If you want to but think you might struggle, then have a go at this [computer programming aptitude test](#) from the University of Kent – you may be pleasantly surprised... In my own case, I got stuck there for quite a while until one day a whole pile of O Level algebra that was lurking in my brain suddenly rose out of the murk, and that was that.

Stage 2 people, on the other hand, tend to be *really dangerous*... I have personally worked with quite a few well-paid developers who are stuck in Stage 2, and they tend to be the ones who drop all the bombs on your system. So the faster you can get through to Stage 3, the better. This was at the root of my concern, as one of the ideas of Library Carpentry is to pick up skills quick, and then pass them on. But I needn't have worried because...

When I asked Dr Baker about this issue, he reassured me that 'questioning whether the computer has done what you expected' is a core learning point that is central to Library Carpentry, too. He also declared the following (which I'm going to steal): "I make a point of only ever working with people with [Impostor Syndrome](#)".

Hence it really does look as if getting to Stage 3 *without even going through Stage 2 at all* is what Library Carpentry is all about. I believe moves are afoot to get some of this good stuff going at Cambridge... I watch with interest and might even be able to find the time to join in..? I bet it'll be fun.

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2 THOUGHTS ON “BREAKING THROUGH WITH LIBRARY CARPENTRY”

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