Comrades in the Commons

Creating an Organizational Culture Conducive to Open Source Development

Southern Mississippi IR Day
April 27, 2018
Hello, comrades!

Bryan J. Brown
- @bryjbrown on Twitter/GitHub
- Repository Developer
  - ~4 years @ FSU
  - Mainly work on DigiNole
    - Digital Archive + IR
    - Built on Islandora
- Became interested in socialism/Marxism because of Open Source software
  - Not the opinion of my employer, etc
Comrades in the Commons:

Creating an Organizational Culture Conducive to Open Source Development
“Men feel that cruelty to the poor is a kind of cruelty to animals. They never feel that it is an injustice to equals; nay it is treachery to comrades.”

- Gilbert K. Chesterton
Comrade

- A fellow friend/colleague/ally/worker
- Contextually related to labor/equality

- From the French Revolution
- Popularised by Russian Revolution
- Not necessarily socialist/communist

- Co-workers are comrades!
- Users are comrades!
- We are IR comrades!
Commons

- Public resources available to a society
- Privately owned property excluded

- Information Commons
  - Wikis
  - Openly licensed works
    - Open source software
      - GPL one of the first examples
Open Source Software

- Relative to “Closed Source” or “Proprietary” software
- Also known as “Free Software”
  - Free as in freedom/beer/kittens
- Popular examples:
  - Linux
  - Wordpress
  - Firefox
  - Drupal
  - Fedora
Open Source Software

**Pros**
- Modify as you wish
  - Make it do new things
  - Fix problems yourself
- True ownership of your service

**Cons**
- No vendor support
  - Requires maintenance (staff)
  - You’re on your own
- But not TOTALLY alone
Organizational Culture

- Collective values of an organization that manifest through its behavior
- Example values:
  - Diversity
  - Innovation
  - Frugality
  - Transparency
- Usually a focus on positive things, though negative factors can also be a hidden aspect of an org culture
What Does It All Mean?
What does it all mean?

- We are here to talk about IRs.
- IRs are meant to expand the information commons.
- IRs can be Open Source (2.5%)
- Organizations choosing Open Source technology need to adjust their culture to make the most of it.
- Successful Open Source adopters have an organizational culture of shared ownership of services & camaraderie between workers/orgs.
Camaraderie & Shared Ownership

What does camaraderie mean in this specific context?

- Collegiality, but with a socialist flavor
- The feeling you and your coworkers have when you think about the system as your own instead of something out of your control.
- “We’re all in this together.”
Camaraderie & Shared Ownership

- This has been my experience
  - Cultural shift around our IR since migrating to Islandora
  - Similar to when we moved website authoring to a shared model

- Marxism can be a helpful lens to look at Open Source through
  - Collective ownership of the means of production
  - Community is hugely important
A Tale of Two Cultures

- Organizational culture associated with proprietary software
  - Acceptance of current functionality
    - “It is what it is.”
    - “Maybe in a future update.”
  - Minimal sense of ownership
    - Innovation is out of your control
  - Fear of migration
    - Why would a business want to make it easy for you to move?
A Tale of Two Cultures

- Organizational culture associated with free software
  - Freedom to modify
    - “We can do better!”
    - “How can we fix this?”
  - Sense of ownership
    - Innovation is in your hands
  - Freedom to migrate
    - “Why would we want to build an app to lock ourselves in?”
Responsibility & Control

- Primary difference: who bears ultimate responsibility for quality?
  - Proprietary software: Vendors
  - Open Source software: YOU

- Successful adopters of free software understand they have total control over their service
  - This means no one to say no
  - Also means no one else to blame
Responsibility & Control

In a nutshell:

Successful Open Source adopters ENTHUSIASTICALLY bear the burden of quality for their services.
How to Bear the Burden of Quality
The Burden of Quality

Ownership through vectors of control:
- Hiring & Training
- Responsibility
- Scope of service
- User experience
- External aggregation
- System performance
- Staff involvement
- Community involvement
Hiring & Training

- Build a culture that hires and trains enthusiastic people to solve problems, as opposed to buying a solution
  - May be more expensive, but allows greater freedom to innovate
  - Services can be tailored to your org’s unique context, instead of having a one-size-fits-all solution
• Shared ownership and responsibility is good, but still have a primary service owner & engineer to be personally responsible for things
  ○ Owner: public face of service
  ○ Engineer: behind the scenes magic
  ○ Both: Administration & policies
IR is a service your library offers to the community.

- **What services?**
  - Faculty publications?
  - Theses & dissertations?
  - Grey literature?
  - Data?

- **What community?**
  - Your university?
  - Academia?
  - THE WORLD???
User Experience

- The biggest possible advantage of Open Source if done correctly
- The biggest liability if done badly
- You know your users better than a vendor
  - Do frequent usability tests
  - Rank usability issues & resolve them
  - Make users feel like co-owners
  - Find your “champion” users
External Aggregation

- Understand that most consumers of your IRs holdings will not be finding them through your IR
- Stay on top of SEO best practices
  - A good IR usually does this for you
- Sample external aggregators for your holdings
  - Contact those aggregators for help if you aren’t finding them
System Performance

- Your servers = your problem
- Slow applications are a system problem that turns into a usability problem
- Ditto for unavailable applications
- Set up system monitoring & alerts
- Good sysadmins are the lifeblood of a healthy open source application
- This can be outsourced by getting a vendor hosted Open Source application.
Staff Involvement

- Do not neglect your internal comrades!

- Make EVERYONE feel like a co-owner
  - Leverage staff expertise whenever possible
  - More perspectives often yields better designs/decisions/services
  - The simple act of including others in decision making fosters feelings of collective ownership
Community Involvement

- Do not neglect your external comrades!

- Other organizations using the same open source software have likely run into the same issues you have.

- Share:
  - Code
  - Documentation
  - Best practices
  - War stories
Thank you, comrades!