IMLS Blog Post Draft

Linked Data is data that can fit into a "cloud" of interconnected data sources, whether those sources are published world-readably on the Web (Linked Open Data) or behind corporate or institutional firewalls (Linked Enterprise Data). With the recent spread in awareness of Linked Data, cultural memory institutions increasingly see compatibility with Linked Data as an opportunity to create rich linkages between their own systems and data on the wider Web with potential for enrichment of both. This trend has emerged very quickly, leaving everyone scrambling to catch up -- not just working professionals in libraries and museums, but also the information-school faculty and professional trainers responsible for training both current professionals and the next generation.

The "Learning Linked Data" project, funded through September 2012 by a one-year planning grant under IMLS's National Leadership program, set out a vision of an online environment to support library and museum professionals in learning the principles and practice of Linked Data. The project aimed to design an online "language lab" with the software tools and methods needed for analyzing and processing data. In order to refine this idea, the project convened a workshop of twenty instructors, students, and technology experts. The workshop was hosted in February 2012 by the project lead on the campus of the Information School at the University of Washington.

The participants at the workshop soon recognized the potential for widely diverse needs among users of such an environment, from working professionals seeking to learn enough to solve problems on the job to students seeking professional qualification (and their instructors!), from information science students with little background in information technology to computer science students with little background in information science. Such wide-ranging needs prevented the project from limiting its focus to any one pedagogical approach. Rather, the group focused on refining an Inventory of Learning Topics that outlines basic analytical and software skills needed across a wide range of learning contexts, independently of pedagogical goals and methods.

The Inventory of Learning Topics identifies "prerequisite" topics necessary for understanding the conceptual underpinnings of Linked Data, plus several areas for which competence in software tool use is required as part of the learning process: for searching Linked Data, creating data, visualizing webs of data, and implementing Linked Data applications. This inventory was posted on a website hosted by the UW iSchool for input from a larger circle of colleagues, who responded with many helpful suggestions -- both on the blog and by email -- for instructional scenarios and useful tools. In particular, colleagues pointed to websites with "playable" examples that allow users to tweak computer code and immediately view corresponding results. Numerous colleagues confirmed their interest in using such a platform, pointing out the difficulty of navigating the vast and shifting landscape of software tools without the sort of map envisioned for Learning Linked Data.

The group concluded that a follow-on project should aim at engaging instructors in a dialogue with software developers to match analytical tasks with specific software tools in order to provide instructors and students with a well-organized and carefully documented collection of

video microtutorials. This concept is being developed into a practical implementation plan to be proposed to IMLS in January 2013 as an implementation project. The project members plan to partner with a metadata community platform, the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative, in order to establish this work in a context that is sustainable beyond the two years of the project itself.