Open Data Literacy: Washington State Library

Preliminary Environmental Scan Findings

2018-08-03

# Methods

* Interviewed librarians at 10 public library systems that have participated in Data Equity for Main Street, a pilot project in open data literacy curriculum for the general public. Contacted all 7 participating public library systems in Washington State, and 3 in California based on suggestions from Data Equity leadership. Sought assessment of Data Equity activities undertaken so far, open data plans going forward and suggestions about potential State Library support. Reviewed Data Equity curriculum and project site for further evaluative commentary.
* Gathered information about open data programs and services at 12 additional public library systems in Washington State, two from each population-served tier (over 250K, 100K-250K, 25K-100K, 5K-25K, under 5K with certified librarian, under 5K with no certified librarian). Reached 9 systems for interview or email exchange; reviewed websites of remaining three systems, after receiving no reply to emails. Sought information about library service population and programming, current open data activities (if any), openness to open data activities and suggestions about potential State Library support.
* Mapped open data publishing in Washington State by local governments. Searched for open data for all 39 Washington State counties, as well as the largest city by population in each county (using a population breakdown from the Washington Office of Financial Management). Searched “open data [locality name]” on Google, and searched the locality’s website for “data.”
* Evaluated openness of public library statistics published on all 50 state library websites. Noted ease of navigation, format (machine-readable? Proprietary?) of statistics, permanent identifier and links to other data.

# Findings

## Library Open Data Activities

### Publishing

* Just two public library systems were publishing open data, both in large tech-friendly cities (c. 1 million people) with open data mandates.
* Most other libraries were open to publishing data about themselves, especially if they had infrastructure, toolkits, tips and other support to do so.
* Two libraries were interested in providing portals, not only for library data but other local agencies’ data as well.

### Instruction

* Eleven of the library systems (10 Data Equity systems and 1 non-Data-Equity system) had conducted open-data instruction for the public or staff.
* Librarians were mixed about the value of open-data classes for the general public, at least currently. Low attendance (1-3 people in many cases, with the highest attendance between 12 and 16) was a problem in many places, even after vigorous outreach to users with research-driven interests (e.g., community activists). Those who did attend, however, were engaged and gave positive feedback in evaluations. Open data basics, scavenger-hunt-like activities and mapping and charting were particularly popular. In most cases, libraries were uncertain whether they would offer such classes again soon; this was more likely in the few cases where the library had a staff member responsible for adult programming, or digital literacy.
  + Several librarians suggested that instruction might be more effectively delivered just-in-time at the reference desk, or in response to other patron queries.
  + Virtually all librarians said reference librarians should be familiar with open data access and be prepared to show patrons how to use them.
  + Several librarians emphasized that public instruction lay an essential foundation for access, curiosity and future open data use, even if next steps weren’t immediate.
* By contrast, staff training for open data was seen as extremely productive. These events had higher attendance (30-50 for one event, drawing staff from other library systems if invited) and generated enthusiastic engagement. Although no library was formally tracking open data use after training, training librarians received informal signs of enthusiasm -- thank-you emails, and continuing conversations about using open data both internally and with the public.

### Advising

* Two Washington State municipal libraries are collaborating with city leaders to launch or improve open data portals. (In California another large city library already collaborates with the city on emergency planning, digital privacy policy and education, and is interested in helping the city improve its open data portal.)
  + These sites provide excellent case studies for such partnerships. In each case, city leadership has recognized qualities that make libraries natural advisors -- namely, tech-friendliness, day-to-day contact with users, and long experience using data to demonstrate value. Some partnerships have coincided with a change in leadership, and strategic planning.
  + Librarians said open data publishing is clearly valuable for minimizing public records request. Because of their culture and experience, libraries can also help educate other agencies about the benefits of working openly -- including demonstrating value to the public, openly acknowledging public concerns and areas for improvement, and improving internal operations.
* At least five other Washington State libraries contacted are poised to take an advisory role, if the opportunity arises and especially if they have a few more tips on how to start a conversation or assert the library’s role. Two libraries expressed interest in providing an open data portal for the library and other agencies.

### Librarians’ suggestions about how the State Library could support their open data activities

* Provide infrastructure/platform that supports an open data portal, or a state-supported data repository, which would standardize format and provide long-term management.
* Provide toolkits, curriculum, marketing materials, training, starting points and other tips about how to publish open data, connect patrons to open data and work with local agencies to publish open data.
* Develop open data e-curriculum that can be embedded in a library or open data site.
* Talk with libraries and local governments about open data, even if they don’t quite appear ready for open data. Start a conversation now, wherever they are.
* Provide a curated list of open data resources, with annotations.

## Open Data Publishing by Local Government in Washington State

* Approximately 27 of Washington State’s 39 counties publish some form of open data, although this is overwhelmingly GIS -- in some cases, just a few files posted on a website. Only a handful of counties and largest cities surveyed publish additional data in portals. Further details forthcoming.
* [Eastern Washington University’s *Community Indicators* sites](http://www.communityindicators.ewu.edu/loc_map.cfm) showcase data about 10 regions in the state, and reflect a community-centered process where EWU seeks input from various local agencies and organizations. The sites allow easy navigation, and users can simply view data on the site, or download the dataset. The data appears to mainly come from federal or state sources.

## Public Library Statistics Publishing by State Libraries

* By open data publishing standards, Washington State compares well with other state libraries for public library statistics. Its statistics are two clicks away from the Home page (under Library Services), and statistics are easy to download in Excel.
* Changes that would make the statistics even more open would be the following:
  + Provide a Statistics link from the Home page.
  + Make statistics available in single-sheet format.
  + Allow export in .csv.
  + Create a permanent identifier and opportunity to link/cite statistics (e.g., [Colorado Library Research Service’s public library statistics](https://www.lrs.org/public/data/basic/))
* As of Aug. 1, the Washington State Library had already updated recent statistics to provide a single-sheet .csv format.

# Possible next steps between State Library and ODL

* **Identify ways the State Library (or OCIO) could provide a federated platform for open data publishing**, which eases publishing by public libraries and local agencies, and frees public libraries to focus on the valuable advisory and instructional roles to which they are supremely suited.
* **Pull together a support guide for public libraries**, providing toolkits, curriculum, and starting points for publishing open data, working with local government and connecting patrons to open data (through one-on-one, instruction, e-curriculum, collections/lib guides). Connect libraries to available training through the State Library, for example, in leadership and advocacy.
* **Help develop open data e-curriculum** that can be embedded in library websites and open data portals.
* **Identify local governments and public libraries ready to take next step on open data.** Examine local government and library websites for open-government documentation, guides to open data or other gestures of transparency.
* **Visit sites where libraries are advising (or ready to advise) local government**, and learn more about why these partnerships work. Starting with library-government collaborations on open data portals, but also visit places where libraries have good relationships with local government, have an interest in working with government on open data publishing, or whose services and website are already friendly to data and transparency.
* **Continue talking to public library systems in the state, and survey more county libraries**. Use surveys when they make sense, but qualitative methods may get the richest information about readiness.
* **Continue mapping Washington State counties/cities/local districts open data publishing,** taking a closer look at the quality of publishing and gathering more precise information about the categories and volume of data published. Expand to cover more localities and agencies, surveying at least public health departments.
* **Connect open data to existing State Library services**, such as youth services, tribal libraries and Worksource.