

Manipulating Metadata : XSLT for Librarians

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Report

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The day long XSLT preconference held in conjunction with the Annual American Library Association Conference in July, 2009 was designed as a hands-on session with every participant had a pc to work at coding a style sheet along with the presenters as they explained XSLT coding. There was a great amount of material to present and, unfortunately, not all of the material was able to be covered in the session. However, the presenters made available DVDs of the exercises and finished coding and also provided for an online work space that is still available by invitation from Frances Knudson to the "XSLT class files" on box.net (<http://www.box.net/signup/collab/hr0p3122sh>). The presenters still remain available to work with participants in this online environment and may be amenable to working with interested CCLA parties (contact: Frances Knudson [fknudson@lanl.gov]).

XSLT is basically code, similar to the HTML coding used to create displays for web pages, that can transform a basic XML data file into a pleasingly human readable format. The beauty of it is that you can use the XSLT coding to manipulate the data with a machine to produce almost any display format desired without having to reform or manipulate the XML data file itself.

The class assumed basic familiarity with reading and creating XML code and concentrated primarily on coding necessary to create XSLT style sheets. The majority of those in the class who had created XSLT style sheets had cut and pasted code together from existing code someone else had created, so starting from scratch was new to most participants. Employing an XML editor was highly encouraged and the presenters recommended the oXygen XML editor (30-day free trial, java based, Mac and PC compatible, and more user friendly than XMLSpy). The editor allowed you to transform the XML code to the final format without having to use additional software. The bulk of the workshop was spent in highlighting the basics of the XSLT coding and applying them by following along and typing in the code as it was presented. There wasn't much time for experimenting, and if you got behind at a particular juncture, catching up was very difficult. The XSLT code is similar in many respects to HTML coding with smatterings of what looked similar to Unix programming code---kind of a hybrid between the two. XPath language was recommended for use as a shorthand method for marking locations and selecting sets of nodes within an XML document which helps to avoid redundancy in the straight XSLT code and helps to decrease the length of the final code product. Someone with a strong background in web page creation **and** computer programming would probably pick this up without a lot of struggle. For someone with little experience in either, the learning curve would be quite high. The presenters concluded that the only way to get proficient at XSLT coding is to "do it, and do it over and over." A copy of the manual and the DVD for the course are included with this report.

Recommended references:

The XSLT 2.1 Programmers Reference by Michael Kay

Beginning XSLT 2.0 by Jenni Tennison

XSL Frequently Asked Questions <http://www.dpawson.co.uk/xsl/>