

Forget the beach, let's learn about coding

During January, 23 high school students gave up two weeks of their holidays to attend the Open Source Academy, as Kristina Hoepfner explains.

After the success of last year's inaugural event, Year 11-13 students from around the country were again invited to attend the Open Source Academy in Wellington. Organised by Catalyst IT, the premier open source software development specialist in Australasia, 23 eager participants took part from Auckland, Christchurch, Napier and Wellington.

They learned to install the free Linux Ubuntu operating system on their training laptops, familiarised themselves with the terms 'freedom' and 'community' and what these mean for open source projects, found out how the web works, and were taught basic programming principles. They went on to install their own server, which was accomplished on Where's My Server, a New Zealand-based virtual hosting service that sponsored the virtual machines for the students.

Learning how open source software developers often do their work was a good experience for the students, who enjoyed using the command line interface and common tools of the trade.

Contributing their own code

The first six days of presentations and workshops were given by 20 open source enthusiasts from Catalyst IT and three guest speakers: Kah Chan and Dr Brenda Chawner, from Victoria University of Wellington; and Brenda Wallace.

The second week was largely dedicated to project work. The students each chose one of five projects to learn more about and to contribute their own code. One student also contributed to the ePortfolio system Mahara (PHP) in addition to his chosen project.

- **aCal** – calendaring software (Java for Android)
- **Drupal** – content management system (PHP)
- **Kiritaki Koha** – mobile client for Koha (Java for Android)
- **Koha** – integrated library management system (JavaScript, unit testing)
- **Map of CPAN** – discovery tool for Perl modules (JavaScript)

Each project group was mentored by at least one Catalyst developer. Special thanks should go to Andrew McMillan, a former Catalyst IT director, who supported students working on the aCal Android project.

Making coding more enjoyable

The group accomplished a lot during their four days of project work and were challenged to work with programming languages that were new to them. Along with solving the problems, they were able to organise themselves to work collaboratively, making the research and coding more enjoyable.

Most of the students said the second week was the best part of the Academy as they participated in real-world projects, for the most part contributing to core code, and got to make their first mark in internationally available software. They can now show others – friends, family and prospective employers – the parts they have contributed.



The future of the Open Source Academy

One of the most often heard suggestions for improvements is that the Academy should be longer and allow students to come back for a few days during other school holidays to manifest their learning and knowledge, and continue working with their mentors. Participants were also keen on completing pre-Academy tasks to bring them up to speed with some of the concepts and techniques that were unfamiliar to them.

Catalyst Directors Don Christie and Mike O'Connor say that they are currently discussing the ideas the students had for future mentorships and the Academy, and also exploring how to make changes to this summer programme. Plans are underway to offer the Open Source Academy again in 2013 and companies and organisations that operate in the open source space are invited to join in expanding this initiative. >

KRISTINA HOEPPNER IS AN E-LEARNING SPECIALIST AT CATALYST IT.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CATALYST OPEN SOURCE ACADEMY GO TO CATALYST.NET.NZ/ACADEMY

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