The First Los Angeles Arts Datathon

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By Aurora Meneghello

WOW. I signed up for the very first Arts Datathon in Los Angeles out of curiosity – I didn't know what to expect. And was I surprised! The LA Arts Datathon took place on Saturday April 22nd, and it was an amazing event. I left feeling inspired by all the people who came to share ideas and tools to improve access to the arts and art education in Los Angeles.

Photography by Alexia Lewis

Every day we hear about a new move by Facebook or some other tech company to use our data in order to reap financial rewards, with little or no regard for individual privacy and community welfare. In contrast, the Los Angeles Arts Datathon offered a welcome respite from greed and shortsightedness by focusing on sharing how to access the data that we own as citizens. The team behind the LA Arts Datathon also introduced us to tools and approaches to make use of such data in order to increase access to the arts and art education, particularly in the Los Angeles area.

The event started with breakfast and a series of short talks and presentations from the main event organizers, the City of LA Department of Cultural Affairs and the LA County Arts Commission . Sunil Iyengar, the Director of the NEA's Office of Research & Analysis joined us to share how to access the data gathered by the NEA.

Artists Luke Kanter provided some stretching and levity, and then we heard from Michelle Higgins (arts nonprofits data), Matt Agustin (arts education data), Yvonne Lee (public art data), Zannie Voss who introduced us to the National Center for Arts Research, and Wendy Hsu (social media as arts data). They shared with us where to find datasets and some possible uses and applications of the available data. They were followed by Susannah Laramee Kidd who shared a brief tutorial about data visualization in Excel, Mike Manalo presenting the Socrata platform, and Katja Krivoruchko talked about mapping data with Esri. More information about data tools was also made available here.

After lunch we got together with our groups – all groups were assigned by the event organizers – and we were given a couple of hours to choose a problem to tackle, and to create a proposal using available data to solve it. The issue had to relate to improving access to the arts and arts education. Some of the groups put together amazing pitches, one in particular stood out: within the time frame allotted, Group #1 came up with an idea to encourage people to check out independent bookstores, visualizing their location and proximity to public transit, complete with plans and drawings for a companion app.
Other groups focused on free art events vs. paid, and a variety of other topics. My group explored the correlation between access to the arts in education in Los Angeles County and college-readiness at the time of high school graduation. Hector Chaira, founder of We Want To Dance, gave our presentation, based in part on what he's been researching for his non profit work.

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Apart from the useful technology that was shared, the generosity and commitment to making Los Angeles a better place are what made this event so inspiring. The only antidote to the selfishness and greed we see every day in the news is working collaboratively to share, support, and help each other.

I am looking forward to the next Arts Datathon next year, if this was the first, I can only imagine what the organizers will come up with next time around!