What is a hackathon?

I accidentally ended up organising a hackathon recently. RHOK NYC could have been a tragedy. I was too overloaded to help organize it, the local Crisiscommons lead was too busy, and the young man who stepped in to lead was inexperienced with hackathons and unsupported but managed to pull things together well until the fortnight before, when RHOK NYC lost its venue. Which is a big deal in New York – – they're not easy to come by for a weekend event with a sleep-over (or rather a crash on the floor for a couple of hours in-between coding -over). Oh, and the young man was unexpectedly out of the country at another event.

So we cancelled, got talked back into trying again, and put out the call to the local volunteer technical community. The community answered us, in spades. Within a week, Phil from Open Plans found us a venue via Naomi and Beth at New York Law School; Josh from the UN Mission to UNICEF offered us space in their building, and Phil's friends Danielle and Beth offered to take the whole RHOK NYC contingent wholesale into their Open Data Day hackathon on the upcoming US Farm Bill and its effects on agriculture. NY Hackers offered support, and JonMark from the StartupBus offered sandwich money and advice from his new position as Twilio's developer evangelist.

We then had a week to go and no main organizer, so we took the hackathon-sharing option (where hardcore hackers met gourmet macrobiotic pizza, but that's a story for another day). There's a whole post of thankyous to be had (it's on the RHOK website), bun in short it worked out really really well. And the most unexpected benefit came from mixing the Farm Bill people who'd never run or been to a hackathons before with our little band of hard-core techs and hackathons veterans ('0' in the previous hackathons box met 'over 10').

And I met Sarah from Oxfam who said "I had no idea what a hackathon was".

Wow. After years of evangelizing, it's easy to forget that for many people outside the tech community, this is utterly completely new (and perhaps a little terrifying too – props to Sarah for coming along anyway).

The short answer is that a hackathon strengthens your volunteer technical community and teaches you more about your specialist subject – whether that be how to build better iphone apps or distribute food aid around the world. And each others' subjects too. My favourite moment was a Farmbill lady who'd come expecting hand-designed graphics walking by a RHOK hacker, saying "could you just do a scraper for (some random farming subject) for me please?", to be met with "sure, it'll take about 10 minutes". Transfer of skills and information – it's beautiful to watch.

The long answer is that eventually hackathons run like this. A lot goes on before a hackathon: finding sponsors, finding a venue, finding subject matter experts, advertising the event to potential attendees, organizing catering, sorting security, planning. But on the day (or weekend), typically:

- Everyone turns up , drinks coffee and chats with other attendees (don't worry – hackers don't bite, and we generally have a good sense of humour. Even at 1am when our computer crashes and loses our code). Then the hacking starts.

- Subject matter experts (people who understand the problems you're trying to address with the hackathon) come up one by one to describe a problem that they want to work on, or a system they want to build, or even their area in general (not all great hacks are pre-determined).

- People gravitate to the problems that interest them to form teams.

- Then spend the day/weekend working on the problem: building designs, code, visualisations using whatever skills, data, code and knowledge they can glean (problem providers: please have someone on standby for the hackathon, even if they're at home – it's frustrating to make design decisions without a user around, and it's rude not to help the hackers once you've asked the community for help yourself).

- And at the end of the day/weekend, each team stands up and presents their work. There might be prizes, but usually the biggest prize is to go home knowing that you've touched the world in some way. Oh, and know (and have been through a hard day/night with) a lot more interesting people.

Your first hackathon may be different. In your first hackathon, you generally turn up and learn what a hackathon is, by working with the other participants. That learning takes time, so don't beat yourself up if you're not instantly brilliant at the first one you go to.

I was privileged to have been there when a whole subject area – food – went through their first hackathon together. They got it, they did brilliantly, they had some great ideas I hadn't seen before here (like micro-lectures in a room off to the side) and Sarah not only learnt about hackathons and how to create problem statements for them, she also (with her team) won a prize. I'm glad I was there.