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Organizing successful software community workshops

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Have you developed an open source scientific software and it has now become popular? Congratulations! Your software has entered a new phase of its life cycle, and you are now a community manager. Your new role includes: training the next generation of users, identifying and converting power users into contributors, fostering networking opportunities, and making your software visible to a wider audience.

You are considering organizing a 3-day workshop, summer school or user meeting to gather your community in a physical location where people can exchange ideas, join scientific collaborations, discover new applications for their favorite software, and play a role in the governance of your software project. But how much effort is it? How do you fund this event? How do you advertise it? How do you provide incentives for people to attend? Whom to invite as speakers? How to strike the right balance between talks, hands-on sessions and hackathons? Is online/hybrid even an option?

We will answer these questions through two success stories: the ESPResSo summer school¹, and the preCICE workshop², organized annually since 2006 and 2020, respectively. Both events attract ~50 people every year with a budget under €10,000. They combine lectures, hands-on sessions, poster sessions and user support sessions to train newcomers and seasoned users alike.

ESPResSo summer schools are organized as CECAM Flagship Schools and yield ECTS points as part of the University of Stuttgart curriculum. Participation fees are waived thanks to RSE grants³ and SimTech. Core lessons teach algorithms for soft matter physics using the ESPResSo software, while posters and scientific talks help connect with scientists from other software communities. Teaching material is hosted on the CECAM platform, recorded lectures are available on YouTube, and Jupyter notebooks⁴ are remotely executable on the Binder platform⁵.

preCICE workshops cover parts of their costs via project funding and get support from local scientific organizations for managing registration and finances. The schedule encourages partial attendance, allowing seasoned users to focus on project updates. A structured course offers new users a starting point, while user support sessions help plan next steps together with the developers. A world café collects user feedback and discusses future directions, while posters and scientific talks allow users to present their applications and new methods. Recorded talks are available on YouTube and the community engages on the preCICE forum.

References

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