Curating data collections in the classroom: lessons learned

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The data curation project was piloted in Fall 2013 as part of the Foundations of Data Curation course, a required class for the Data Curation Specialization at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The course was conducted in a synchronous online environment with students at different stages of the graduate program who were generally novices to data curation principles and data management.

Project objectives

Each student individually curated a digital data collection by identifying curation needs, designing and implementing a curation plan, and producing products suitable for use by a repository.

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Success requires...

- Data repository and researcher participation and support
- Instructor background with
  - hands-on data curation experience
  - adequate disciplinary knowledge
  - familiarity with data center requirements

Lessons learned

INSTRUCTOR INSIGHTS:

- Adequate time needed for students to work on the project (2.5 to 3 months)
- Provision of time and space for students to discuss work in progress (synchronous and asynchronously)
- Challenge of assigning ‘grades’ for work completed

STUDENT INSIGHTS:

- Data curation involves “detective work” and “strategic thinking”; it is a creative, evolving, complex process that encompasses mediation and collaboration
- Curation requires understanding the data and research being done
- There is no one-size-fits-all solution for curation

Improving the project

Need better ways to ensure students share progress and results (i.e., maximize learning). Possibilities for project improvement include:

- Incorporating verbal reports into weekly class sessions
- Integrating additional milestones to mark project progress, which allows instructor to provide additional guidance as needed
- Proposing group rather than individual projects to mirror real-world collaborative work