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Collaborative Curation: Best Practices for Student Exhibits with Large Classes

As college and university special collections become more invested and successful in campus outreach, the demand for intensive instruction services, particularly student-curated exhibits, has increased. Supporting this type of experiential learning for large classes is particularly challenging. The authors of this paper suggest specific, practical steps for best practices in implementing student-curated exhibits with large classes by drawing on their experiences with four such exhibits at the University of Michigan, curated by classes ranging from twenty-five to one hundred students. Crucial elements include advance communication, collaboration across library units, the use of scaffolded instruction sessions, pre-selection of materials, and integration of assessment into the learning experience.

As college and university special collections become more invested and successful in campus outreach, the demand for intensive instruction services has increased. In recent years, the University of Michigan Library Special Collections Research Center has received more frequent requests to provide instruction to large classes and to support projects other than the traditional research paper, such as exhibit curation. Although this is an exciting trend, meeting these demands can be challenging. Since winter 2017, the authors have supported student-curated online and physical exhibits by a variety of classes, including classes of more than 50 students. Repeated iterations and variations on this project have helped us develop guidelines for successful student-curated exhibits with large classes.

Student-curated exhibits are an excellent example of the surge in experiential and project-based learning happening across higher education. The Association of American Colleges & Universities identifies these types of active learning experiences as High-Impact Educational Practices.[1] A cross-institutional, longitudinal study conducted using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education indicates that the active and collaborative learning experiences fostered through High-

1. George D. Kuh, "High-Impact Educational Practices," Association of American Colleges & Universities, https://www.aacu.org/node/4084 [accessed 14 February 2020].

Impact Educational Practices enhance meaningful learning outcomes including critical thinking skills and intercultural effectiveness.[2] Instructors and students value the transferable skills gained through researching and writing exhibit labels, as well as the enduring object (a physical or online exhibit) that disseminates the results of that work. In addition, exhibit curation requires students to work closely with primary sources, supporting progress toward ACRL's Primary Source Literacy Guidelines 3 (Read, Understand, and Summarize) and 4 (Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate).[3]

A growing range of approaches to student-curated exhibits is emerging in the professional literature. Bradley, Wermager, and Silberblatt describe the development of an artists' book exhibition by a seminar course. This class of six students' deep involvement in all aspects of the exhibition—from concept to publicity—compresses the entire exhibit process into a single semester of regular special collections sessions.[4] Hansen describes a similar model for a class exhibit of medieval books, but she notes the strain of working in this way with 15 students. A class of this size makes it more challenging to build consensus and collaboration to the degree this model requires.[5] She ultimately suggests either a smaller class size or a necessarily smaller degree of student autonomy. Prendergast and Totleben provide a recent case study that departs from this comprehensive seminar model. They describe a 16-person class curating a Don Quixote exhibit based on just two special collections sessions. In this case, students were given more definition for their individual contributions and roles, which helped maintain both pedagogical rigor and a sense of collaboration.[6] Others have written about expanding a similar approach from a single course to ongoing programs, either across a range of courses[7] or as a partnership with a particular academic unit.[8] In the latter case, one class notably included more than 40 students across several sections.

2. Cindy A. Kilgo, Jessica K. Ezell Sheets, and Ernest T. Pascarella, "The Link between High-Impact Practices and Student Learning," *Higher Education* 69, no. 4 (April 2015): 509–25.

3. ACRL RBMS-SAA Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy," Society of American Archivists, https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy [accessed 14 February 2020].

4. Laurel Bradley, Kristi Wermager, and Gabriel Perri Silberblatt, "Exhibiting Artists' Books: Three Perspectives from a Curatorial Seminar," in *Past or Portal: Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, eds. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012), 237–41.

5. Marianne Hansen, "Real Objects, Real Spaces, Real Expertise: An Undergraduate Seminar Curates an Exhibition on the Medieval Book of Hours," in *Past or Portal: Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, eds. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012), 240.

6. Ryan Prendergast and Kristen Totleben, "Course Design, Images, and the Class-Curated Exhibit," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 19, no. 2 (2018).

7. Jennie Davy and Amy C. Schindler, "Student Curators in the Archives: Class Curated Exhibits in Academic Special Collections," in *Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, ed. Sarah Theimer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

8. Katherine Crowe, Robert Gilmor, and Rebecca Macey, "Writing, Archives and Exhibits: Piloting Partnerships between Special Collections and Writing Classes," *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues* 29, no. 1/2 (2019).

In addition to the conversation about models for student-curated exhibits, the pedagogy of exhibit label writing fits into principles espoused in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs, as well as a growing interest in public scholarship. A core principle of WAC pedagogy is that "writing is highly situated."[9] In practice, this means that students need to be familiarized with genres to prepare them to write in an unfamiliar rhetorical situation, such as exhibit label writing. Exhibit labels are both an unfamiliar genre and an opportunity for students to write for their peers or a public audience, a practice that, Phegley argues, "inspires them to do their best work."[10] Phegley's finding about the beneficial effects of writing for a public audience is echoed by Davidson, who discovered that student writing online "was incomparably better than in traditional papers" because it was aimed at their peers and a public audience.[11] DeSpain used the public aspect of exhibit labels to help students grasp the genre when she had them create Omeka exhibits in her book history course. To help students conceptualize their exhibits and craft the accompanying text, she asked them to craft an audience analysis. This process helped them imagine their exhibit as public scholarship by considering "who will interact with their materials, what might attract them, and how they will respond."[12] The foundational text on exhibit labels is Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, which outlines in detail how to approach label writing as well as how to think about audience.[13] Understanding audience expectations is a key step in helping students master an unfamiliar genre, and exhibit label writing can be an important element of writing pedagogy.

This article enters the conversation on student curation and exhibit label writing from the perspective of working with large, lecture-based courses at the University of Michigan. When there are more than 25 students in a class, managing the workload and ensuring appropriate treatment of materials presents additional challenges. Rather than describing case studies in detail, we draw on our experience with four class exhibits from 2017 to 2020 to suggest action-oriented guidelines for successfully scaling up student-curated exhibits. By presenting best practices, we hope to encourage colleagues in a variety of institutional contexts to feel confident embarking on student-curated exhibits. Key elements explored below include: ingredients for a successful planning phase with instructors and library colleagues,

9. Michelle Cox et al., "Statement of WAC Principles and Practices," Colorado State University, https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/principles/statement.pdf [accessed 2 September 2020].

10. Jennifer Phegley, "Rethinking Student Research and Writing in the Digital Age: The Punch Historical Archive, 1841–1992 and the NINES Classroom Exhibit Space," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48, no. 2 (2015): 183–96.

11. Cathy Davidson, "Collaborative Learning for the Digital Age," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, https://www.chronicle.com/article/collaborative-learning-for-the-digital-age/ [accessed 18 March 2021].

12. Jessica DeSpain, "On Building Things: Student-Designed Print and Digital Exhibits in the Book History Class," *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 22, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 32.

13. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

considerations for exhibit-oriented library instruction lesson plans, and opportunities for assessment and improvement of student exhibit projects.

Student-Curated Exhibits: 2017–2020

The 200- and 300-level courses that this article is based on followed a similar structure: Librarians met with classes two to four times to provide the following: 1) an initial orientation to using special collections materials; 2) guidance on finding relevant secondary source research; 3) an introduction to exhibit labels as a genre; and, in some cases, 4) an opportunity for peer review. Because these classes were too large and time was too limited to permit much thematic exploration or consensus-building, instructors and librarians created the exhibit scaffolding by preselecting a large body of potential items within predetermined themes or topics. In each case, the students, alone or in pairs, selected a specific item to research, wrote a 200–250-word exhibit label, and chose the page opening(s) to be displayed. Classes with more than 25 students selected items and wrote labels alone or collaboratively with one other student. Page openings were scanned or photographed by the Library's Digital Conversion Unit, and the online exhibits were published through an institutionally hosted Omeka platform.[14] Two classes launched their exhibits with in-person celebrations, while one received a commemorative bookmark.

In discussing learning outcomes, instructors universally expressed a desire for students to focus on research and writing, rather than the technical infrastructure or metadata involved in building online exhibits, so students were not expected to learn to use Omeka. Once learning outcomes and the basic parameters of the project were agreed upon, course instructors wrote the formal assignment and determined how students would be graded, while librarians developed or tweaked lesson plans and handouts for the library sessions. While largely written separately, these materials were shared so instructors knew what instruction the library was providing and librarians knew the details of the assignment and expectations for students' work.

The first of the four exhibits we will discuss took place in winter 2017, when approximately 80 students in a 300-level English class curated *Jane Austen 1817–2017: A Bicentennial Exhibit*.[15] Librarians preselected about 70 items in three topical areas: Historical Context and Background, Jane Austen Editions, and Fans and Readers. Students attended an introductory library session during which they met with a special collections librarian for an introduction to safe handling and exhibit labels

14. Other platforms for student-curated exhibits could include Wordpress, Scalar, or even social media sites like Instagram or Tumblr.

15. Students of ENG 313 Jane Austen, "Jane Austen 817-2017: A Bicentennial Exhibit," MLibrary Online Exhibits (last modified 2017), https://www.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/jane-austen-bicentennial.

and with the English language and literature subject specialist to gain hands-on experience with literary research databases. Each of the discussion sections attended a second library session, in which students chose a single item to research with a partner and write a label. The resulting exhibit featured 36 distinct items.

In winter 2018, approximately 50 students in a 300-level English class curated Seven Fantasy Classics for Children.[16] Librarians preselected around 100 books representing several classic children's stories, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "Little Red Riding Hood," and "The Little Mermaid." In addition to writing exhibit labels in pairs, each student was required to compose an essay comparing multiple editions of the same text, one of which was the item they chose for the exhibit. This class met with librarians three times. An introductory session was held early in the semester, with the class split between a special collections librarian and the children's literature subject specialist. For this course, the discussion of writing for exhibits was expanded into a second small group session consisting of 25 students and included hands-on practice editing labels from past exhibits. The third session ensured that students could spend time looking in detail at their book with their partner and offered an opportunity to consult with librarians about roadblocks encountered in their secondary source research. The exhibit featured 25 editions of children's stories.

The classes discussed so far spread the exhibit project across the semester. However, in fall 2018, a 200-level US history survey course structured as a series of intensive units required a different approach. In this case, four discussion sections (groups of 12–25 students totaling approximately 75) met in the library for four consecutive weeks to rapidly select and research items for *Scrapbook of American History: From the Revolution to the Civil War.*[17] Librarians preselected about 80 texts representing seven themes, such as Food and Drink, Description and Travel, and Slavery and Abolition.

There were notable alterations to the content of the Scrapbook of American History sessions. First, the label-writing session included a lesson on writing more accessible labels by including a physical description of salient points of the item. We also added a peer-review session. Secondary source research was covered in a previous unit of this course and thus was not part of the instruction for this project. The student assignment also changed for this exhibit. As well as the exhibit label, each pair of students submitted an introduction to the thematic section their

16. Students of ENG 313 Children's Literature and the Invention of Modern Childhood, "Seven Fantasy Classics for Children," MLibrary Online Exhibits (last modified 2018), https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/seven-fantasy-classics.

17. Students of History 260: United States to 1865, "Scrapbook of American History: From the Revolution to the Civil War," MLibrary Online Exhibits (last modified 2018), https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/scrapbook-of-am-history.

label belonged to. For each section, one student contribution was published in the online exhibit. Students also submitted reflective essays on their experience to the course instructor. This exhibit featured 36 distinct publications.

We followed a compressed timeline again for a smaller, 25-student version of the children's literature course in winter 2020. Librarians preselected 67 editions of animal fables and fairy tales for "A Menagerie of Animal Tales."[18] This time, a full session was devoted to secondary-source research. Additionally, students were provided with a handout during each session to help guide them and provide a space for written reflection. When the University of Michigan discontinued in-person classes and closed the physical library in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students had already identified page openings and scanning was largely completed. Going above and beyond the call of duty, staff in the Digital Conversion Unit completed the scans as the shutdown was in progress. Students were able to submit their exhibit label text virtually, and the resulting exhibit featured 22 publications.

Best Practices

Based on our experiences with these four classes of varying sizes and pedagogical structures, we now propose a number of best practices to make student-curated exhibits maximally successful and minimally stressful for all involved, with a particular focus on managing large classes. The core elements are as follows: 1) communication and collaboration with stakeholders; 2) careful scaffolding and organization of library instruction sessions; 3) management of physical materials; and 4) assessment. Our experience and focus are primarily on classes curating online exhibits. The principles below also apply to physical exhibits, but there will be additional considerations based on available space, conservation staff, and so on that are not addressed here.

Communicate with Instructors in Advance

Ideally, conversations with instructors should begin four to six months before the project begins and before syllabi are finalized or institutional scanning schedules set. Many instructors will not have prior experience with exhibits and will benefit from a detailed walk-through of the necessary components and process of exhibit curation. Keep in mind that, with a large class, individual student contributions are necessarily smaller and more structured to make the project manageable.

In these conversations, librarians can work with instructors to clarify learning outcomes, assignment details, and the number of library visits. Decide together

18. Students of ENG 313 Children's Literature and the Invention of Modern Childhood, "A Menagerie of Animal Tales," MLibrary Online Exhibits (last modified 2020), https://www.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/animaltales.

exactly what each student will produce for the exhibit and how the exhibit project connects to overall goals for the course. Discuss the outcomes students will be expected to demonstrate. These outcomes could center on interpreting primary sources, situating primary sources in historical and scholarly context, or producing public scholarship. In some cases, instructors will want to pair the exhibit label writing assignment with a longer writing assignment or a reflection paper to offer further opportunities to engage with the materials. Each of these decisions influences the structure of the assignment and the content of librarian-led sessions.

These conversations are also important for setting expectations for everyone's roles. Discuss how best to balance the librarians' responsibility for introducing students to primary source materials and overseeing the exhibit creation with the instructors' responsibility to craft and assess learning outcomes. It is important for instructors or teaching assistants to play a role in the writing and editing process, through methods like giving students feedback or editing the final label submissions for accuracy. Finally, assign responsibility for writing the introduction to the exhibit. When working with a large number of students, it is particularly important that everyone has a shared understanding of the exhibit timeline, assignment details, and roles and responsibilities. It is harder to make changes on the fly with a large class, and misunderstandings can multiply if students are not receiving consistent messaging.

Collaborate with Colleagues

At many institutions, building an exhibit requires partnering with library colleagues across multiple units. Alongside conversations with instructors, be sure to make appropriate arrangements for the storage and organization of the materials used for the class and communicate that information to everyone staffing the reading room. Given that a large class might mean several students arriving in the reading room at once, or a large amount of material on hold, these arrangements should be as clear and straightforward as possible. A printed copy of all the items students in the class will be consulting is helpful, both for staff and student reference. It is also valuable to work with relevant subject specialists. Secondary research is essential to a quality exhibit, and bringing in a subject specialist for instruction and research support gives students a contact with expertise in research strategies. Involving the subject specialist in discussions about the exhibit goals and selecting materials ensures that they understand the types of research and resources that students need to complete the project and can offer expertise when needed. Depending on the structure of your institution, you may also need to reach out to colleagues responsible for digitizing rare materials to ensure that the timing and volume of exhibit material can be integrated into their schedule.

Scaffold Instruction Sessions to Build Skills

Building an exhibit is a complex assignment involving unfamiliar skills, so building lesson plans around a sequence of skills that build on one another is crucial for keeping student learning on track. With limited opportunities to interact with students, a thoughtful, scaffolded approach helps make the most productive use of class time. Scaffolding is an educational method from the constructivist school of educational theory that is defined by Fitzgerald and Larkin as the instructional support that teachers provide to students as they master a task. An essential element of scaffolding involves providing tailored assistance as needed to students through a variety of educational methods. Educational support is slowly removed as students master a task on their own.[19] Librarians can support student learning by breaking the process down into a series of scaffolded steps, while slowly giving the students more autonomy as they curate the exhibit.

We have found the most success with a sequence of four sessions that each focus on a specific skill: handling and observation of special collections materials, exhibit writing as a genre, secondary source research, and peer review. Beginning with hands-on exploration of special collections materials empowers students and invites them to take ownership of the project. Exhibit writing should also be addressed early on so students understand what the end product of their research will look like. Once students have selected an object and conceptualized the project, they are in a strong position to do effective secondary research that contextualizes their object. In the case of one of the classes we worked with, students had already met with the relevant subject specialist earlier in the semester for another project. However, it became clear that they would have benefited from a second session within the exhibit unit, as some students struggled to transfer those skills to a new context. Finally, a peer review session provides an opportunity to bring closure to the project. By providing feedback to each other, students apply various skills addressed throughout the project. It also gives students a chance to situate their own work in the context of the exhibit as a whole, something that can otherwise be challenging when an exhibit is created by a large group of students.

Consider Timing and Mode of Instruction

Scheduling library sessions over four consecutive weeks helps students retain information from one session to the next and provides the sense of a more cohesive project. We also found this model to be more manageable from a staff perspective than spreading sessions across the semester. While those four weeks are very intense, given that each session is generally repeated for two to four sections, this schedule frees up mental space and allows time to focus on other classes at other times. When sessions are spaced out, it's harder to build rapport with students and more repetition of information becomes necessary. Additionally, even though

19. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and Martha J. Larkin, "Scaffolding," *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology*, ed. Neil J. Salkind (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), 864.

this model means more students may be consulting materials in the reading room in a short time, the influx is sometimes easier to manage when it occurs within a more constrained, predictable time period. Regardless of when library sessions are held, it is vital to ensure that student labels and scanning are both complete with enough time to build the exhibit before the end of the semester so that students can see the finished product. In our particular circumstance, we have found that it is best to allow at least two or three weeks to take care of any final label revision, upload and enter metadata for images, and finalize the online exhibit.

Manage Materials to Support Large Classes

How much latitude will students have in selecting materials for their exhibit? Creating a predetermined list of possible items helps streamline the logistics of requesting, pulling, and circulating materials. To retain a sense of agency, students should still have the ability to examine and choose from many options. In practice, we offer about twice as many items as will ultimately be featured in the exhibit. It is also advisable to select sturdy items in good condition that are suitable for handling by a large number of students in a short time.

Support Productive and Responsible Hands-On Learning

The sheer number of students in large classes makes close monitoring of materials usage difficult. At the same time, students encountering primary source materials for the first time may need active support to confidently handle and interpret those materials. The simplest method to improve monitoring and provide greater support is to find ways to divide the class into manageable groups. Consider the capacity of available instruction spaces in comparison to the number of students enrolled in the class and find a way to make those numbers match. For us, the magic number is between 20 and 25, and we have used all the following methods to get to that number. Large lecture classes often have discussion sections, and it may be straightforward to arrange staggered library visits in those sections. Alternatively, it may be possible to schedule a small number of one-time "lab sessions" outside of regular class time. If your usual special collections instruction spaces are very small, consider the feasibility of using other library spaces. We sometimes use a flexible gallery space that is typically booked for large lectures or catered celebrations. Library facilities staff provides temporary tables and chairs in the space, and librarians clean the tables as an additional precaution before laying materials out.

Another course of action is to divide the students into two or more simultaneously taught groups during their regular class meeting time. The sessions can cover the same content in two spaces, or one group can learn research methods while the other examines the material. Students can switch from one group to the other halfway through the class, or sessions can be arranged on multiple days, so all students participate in each for a full class period.

Finally, if you have adequate space and an appropriate amount of staff, it is possible to host a large group of students working with materials all at once. This may require reaching out to colleagues who do not usually do instruction and providing them with an orientation. Be mindful of the materials selected in this case, as the sheer size of the space needed for such classes means that, when intervention is needed, staff may be on the other side of a large room.

Support Students in Exhibit Label Writing

A notable feature of exhibit labels is that they are brief (anywhere from 50 to 250 words), and students will need familiarity with the genre to understand what to include and what can be omitted. In accordance with Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) principles of teaching genre, plan to support their writing process with discussion, instruction, and lots of examples. We have also drawn heavily on Serrell's detailed guidance on writing exhibit labels in developing our instruction materials. Consider using examples from past exhibits written by staff. Being invited to critique and improve professional labels gives students confidence in their own ability to offer valuable insight (see Appendix A: Writing Exhibit Labels Handout). In addition, coordinating the overall narrative and style of the exhibit descriptions requires oversight from librarians and the course instructor.

Best practices for online exhibit writing also includes writing accessible descriptions of the exhibit items for visitors with low vision or those who use screen readers. Depending on your platform, this could be supported by instructing students on writing alternative text (alt text) that clearly communicates the key points of the image, primarily for website visitors who cannot see the image. Alternatively, short descriptions can be integrated into the label text itself. In addition to making the exhibit more accessible, working with students on visual description encourages them to invest energy in their physical and visual analysis of the item.

After drafting their labels, students will need time and structured opportunities for editing. This is crucial for ensuring the quality and consistency of the exhibit. Ideally, there are three layers of editing. Peer review can provide useful feedback and allow students to get a better feel for and sense of ownership of the exhibit outside of their specific item (see Appendix B: Peer Review Worksheet). At the beginning of a peer review, we ask students to think about what was helpful and not helpful in past peer-review experiences. This provides the basis for an agreement on how to proceed with the review. We also discuss what to do with feedback, specifically the idea that not all feedback needs to be incorporated and that feedback from different people often conflicts. We try to group students together working within the same section of the exhibit so they can also consider how the objects they've selected relate to each other and see if any information is repeated or absent within the overall theme.

After peer review, the course instructor or graduate student instructor may provide additional feedback, either to individual students or by offering general pointers based on a review of the drafts as a whole. Finally, librarians may need to lightly revise for length, establish consistency of tone across the exhibit, and address any remaining inaccuracies or infelicities of phrasing. Length is the most common issue requiring correction, as many students struggle with the strict word limit required by the exhibit label genre.

Learn from Assessment

Angelo describes assessment as:

> an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance.[20]

Our approach to assessment follows the spirit of Angelo's framework. Assessment informs our instruction as we teach and also provides the students with moments of introspection about their learning. Because these exhibit projects are time-intensive, gathering feedback from students is an important means of gauging how effectively that time was spent and improving our work with future classes. We recommend incorporating in-class assessment, end-of-semester surveys, reflective writing, and analysis of student labels. Varied forms of assessment provide multiple ways to receive student feedback.

Throughout the exhibit process, each session can conclude with a short **writing prompt**. A minimalist approach might be an index card with just two questions:

> At this point in the exhibit process, I feel most confident about __________.
>
> At this point in the exhibit process, I am still unsure about __________.

20. Thomas A. Angelo, "Reassessing (and Defining) Assessment," *AAHE Bulletin* 48 (1995): 7.

These questions give students a chance to articulate what is making sense to them and where they might need more support. Prompts can also be longer and more detailed, with additional signpost questions guiding students during and after the session. See Appendix C: Day 1 Student Handout for an example of a more expansive handout. Doing formative assessment along the way allows librarians to intervene in student confusion at point of need and helps get a sense of how students are feeling that can be difficult to gauge otherwise in a large class.

End-of-semester **questionnaires** can gather useful information on how students responded to the project. Some questions we have used include:

> The online exhibit project deepened my engagement with, and understanding of, [topic of class/exhibit]. (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)
>
> One piece of advice I would give to future students working on exhibits like these would be ___________.
>
> One thing I would like the librarians who assisted with this project to know is __________.

We ask questions using numerical scales. For example, after the winter 2017 Jane Austen course, 87 percent of students selected a 4 or 5 in response to the statement "the online exhibit project deepened my engagement with, and understanding of, Austen's works," and 94 percent selected a 4 or 5 in response to the statement "the online exhibit project deepened my engagement with, and understanding of, Austen's historical context."

Reflective writing allows students to examine their thinking process throughout the project and how their work fits into the larger whole of the exhibit. Students can be assigned short reflection papers discussing their process and explaining what they chose to emphasize in their label and, if relevant, how they worked with their partner. Students can also write a section overview expressing their understanding of how their item fits into the larger fabric of the exhibit, which offers both an additional opportunity to contextualize their item and a way to build a sense of collective ownership within each exhibit theme.

Exhibit projects require choices and tradeoffs about where to direct time and energy during library instruction sessions, even when one has the luxury of four full sessions. Trends in the **exhibit labels** can tell us where students could have used more support, as well as which aspects of our teaching were most successful. Did students achieve a solid grasp of how to identify appropriate secondary sources? Were they able to effectively interpret and integrate that information with their analysis of the primary source(s)? Is the prose clear and understandable? Reflecting on the exhibit labels as a whole can offer insight into these questions.

Challenges

Like any project-based engagement with a course, student-curated exhibits—especially with large classes—require more planning time and teaching time than one-shot instruction sessions. Even within a large, well-resourced library with an existing platform for online exhibits, these projects are a major commitment of staff time. And, as anyone who has curated exhibits knows, even a simple exhibit is an immense amount of work. At the University of Michigan Library, a team of three to five library staff typically support student-curated exhibits directly, alongside less intensive involvement from staff supporting digitization and reading room use of materials. As the core team has grown more experienced with these projects, we have found our efficiency increasing, with less time necessary in the planning stages of each exhibit. However, the teaching time and exhibit coordination time remain consistent.

- A related challenge is finding the right balance in the assignment. How much input will the class have on exhibit themes? How much choice will they have in selecting materials to include? Exhibit projects become more complex as students have more autonomy over themes and materials. Ultimately, the larger the number of students, the harder it is to manage that complexity. At the same time, students should be empowered rather than limited by the assignment. We typically look to provide choice where it has the greatest impact, namely item selection, and keep other aspects of the assignment more strictly defined to streamline the project.

- While we have found increasing the number of students who can participate in building exhibits with special collections to be rewarding, the sheer number of students in the class is a challenge both because of the volume of material needed for the class and the time-consuming logistics of breaking them into small enough groups for instruction sessions. As we create more exhibits, we also attract more interest and requests for similar projects. While the volume has so far remained manageable, additional requests could exceed capacity, necessitating alternative methods of achieving similar kinds of engagement and consideration of which courses to prioritize. Courses for which an online exhibit is not the ideal method of meeting the instructor's interest in public scholarship will need to be steered into other types of work like class blogs, video essays, or other multimedia projects.

- For an institution with fewer staff or other resource limitations, these projects will require adjustments from what we describe here. At an institution without digitization workflows, equipment, and staff, it might be necessary to use photographs of materials taken by students, to only use materials that can be scanned on a flatbed scanner, or to base the exhibit on an existing digital collection. An institution with very limited reading room hours or a physically small reading room might have difficulty providing students with access to exhibit materials outside of class. In that scenario, it would be important to provide students with enough in-class time to physically engage with materials without the need for individual consultation at other times. Making adjustments to accord with institutional resources and pedagogical goals is key to making student-created exhibits a success.

Conclusion

Up close and in-depth engagement with historical documents is most often the central focus of special collections instruction. Perhaps too often librarians assume this engagement can only happen with small classes. However, our experience in building student-curated exhibits with classes of 25 to 80 students has demonstrated that it is possible to facilitate meaningful engagement at scale. Feedback from instructors has reinforced our sense that these larger-scale exhibits provide valuable experiences for students.

Dr. Lisa Makman, the course instructor for both Seven Fantasy Classics and A Menagerie of Animal Tales, described students' responses as "exuberant," as they "learned about history in an entirely new way and felt they discovered new ways to view objects—including books—as historical artifacts." Professor Adela Pinch, course instructor for Jane Austen 1817–2017: A Bicentennial Exhibit, described seeing "the lightbulbs going off in the students' heads as they learned to think about how to interpret the visual form of a printed book for information about publication, audience, use, and how to bring the knowledge they already had to their interpretations." The opportunity to contribute to a publicly available end product provided extra meaning to students' experience. One student who contributed to the Austen exhibit wrote, "It was so so fun and knowing my work and research went into this awesome online exhibition that anyone can see and that is an official university project is SO cool and rewarding."

Although they may be daunting to contemplate, student-curated exhibits are feasible with large classes, if you communicate early and often with stakeholders, find ways to size and scaffold instruction, and approach formal and informal feedback as assessment to support iterative improvement to the process. And while the logistics and effort involved are great, so are the rewards. In Professor Pinch's words: "this project demonstrated to students the value of the public humanities—it made them feel that they could produce knowledge that was of interest to the public. In this era of pressure on the humanities, and on declining enrollments in humanities classes, I think that a project that allows students to participate in forging the links between the rare materials at the university and the interests of the reading public is priceless."

APPENDIX A. Writing Exhibit Labels Handout

Writing Exhibit Labels

Know the main idea of your label.

What do you want visitors to take away from reading your label? Only include information that relates to this idea.

Start with the object.

The best labels bring the visitor's attention back to the objects on display. What will visitors notice about your book? What questions might they have? Use the object's physical qualities to explore or reinforce your main idea.

Do background research and ask questions about your book.

What's interesting or unique about your book? Who created it? For what audience? Who used or read it? What impact did it have? What background information does someone need to understand the object? Remember that there are several books on each topic, so try to focus on what makes your specific book notable.

Think about your audience.

What do or don't they already know about this topic? How much background do you need to give for them to understand your point? What vocabulary is appropriate to use?

Keep it short.

Remember that your item is part of a larger exhibit, not a standalone essay. Visitors will have a lot of labels to read. Your assignment requires you to write a maximum of 250 words, with some of that text devoted to visual description for site visitors who cannot see the images.

Remember accessibility.

Not all users of our online exhibits can see the images. What information do they need to know that is conveyed in your image? For example, you may need to describe an illustration or provide a brief quotation. Your description does not need to include irrelevant or obvious details, such as "the flowers are green" or "there are page numbers in the corners" or "this book has words printed on paper." Focus on the aspects of the page spread you've selected you want to cue people to look at or read, and then describe those aspects in approximately 50 words.

Revise your label text.

Does everything in your label text support the main idea?

Do you have any really long sentences?

Is there any vocabulary that needs to be defined or restated for visitors to understand?

Do you need to break up a paragraph into multiple paragraphs or a bulleted list?

Are all the facts you include (dates, names, etc.) relevant and correct?

Could someone who isn't part of your class understand everything in your label?

Below are labels from past exhibits by curators and librarians in the Special Collections Research Center. What do you like about these labels? How could they be improved? Keeping in mind that you cannot see the books they refer to, is any information missing to help you understand what was displayed?

From an exhibit on Jane Austen's novels and their cultural context:

> William Hayley (1745–1820). A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids. By a Friend to the Sisterhood … London, Printed for T. Cadell, 1786.
>
> The poet and biographer William Hayley first published this essay on old maids anonymously in 1785. Reprinted multiple times in the early years after publication, the work was widely read and excerpted in periodicals. Hayley's stated intention to defend old maids against critiques of their character and lack of sympathy for their situation underscores the prevailing hostility toward unmarried women in this period. While Hayley professes an earnest interest in the welfare of old maids, critic Devoney Looser argues that readers have long had difficulty determining whether this book is satirical or serious in tone.
>
> Old maidenhood in this text is clearly laid out in class-based terms as a fall from comfortable middle-class life to a struggling existence. Hayley generalizes the condition of women who reach old maidenhood in the following way: "after having passed the sprightly years of youth in the comfortable mansion of an opulent father, she is reduced to the shelter of some contracted lodging in a country town, attended by a single female servant, and with difficulty living on the interest of two or three thousand pounds, reluctantly, and perhaps irregularly, paid to her by an avaricious or extravagant brother." Regardless of the facts of any

> individual unmarried woman's situation, Hayley's essay, and Austen's portrayal of single women like Jane Fairfax and Charlotte Lucas, point to the vulnerability of those who lacked independent means and had few options for earning a living.

From an exhibit showcasing diary and journal writing from across varied collecting areas:

> Candy Darling. *Candy Darling.* New York: Hanuman Books, 1992.
>
> Candy Darling was an actress in independent films and theatrical productions. She is best known as one of Andy Warhol's superstars, with roles in his films *Flesh* (1968) and *Women in Revolt* (1971). Taken from journals kept between 1970 and 1972, the heyday of her acting career, the contents of this volume are fragmentary and varied: unsent letters, jotted-down notes, and short diary entries. Some of the writings collect information Darling wanted to keep handy like names, addresses, or even a recipe for a tropical turkey salad; others are candid explorations of the challenges of being a transgender woman in the early 1970s. Darling was clearly aware of multiple types of value for these writings besides their immediate utility, writing an unsent letter urging a friend to keep her letters both for their financial value and to help Darling write her memoirs someday.
>
> The volume was published by Hanuman Books, a small press founded in 1986 that printed almost all of their books in this particular 3"× 4" size, intending the books to be easy to carry around and consider throughout the day. Darling's inclusion nearly 20 years after her death in a roster of avant-garde poets, musicians, artists, and other creative people makes her lasting influence apparent.

APPENDIX B. Peer Review Worksheet

Your name:

Label you're responding to:

1. Read the label out loud. Are there any parts that you found difficult to read aloud? If so, underline them on your copy of the label text.

2. What is the main idea of this label?

3. Does all of the information in this label support the main idea?

4. How does the information in the label point to the specific book on display (vs. any book on that topic or about that person)?

5. Were any elements of this label confusing or unclear? If so, which parts?

6. Are there any vocabulary terms, people, events, etc. that might need further clarification or context for a general audience?

7. Read the visual description. Can you connect what is discussed in the label to what is described in the description?

8. After reading this label, what questions do you have? Is there anything you still want to know more about?

APPENDIX C. Day 1 Student Handout

The History of the Book and Choosing Books for Your Assignment

Today you are going to learn some basic information about the history of book publishing with an emphasis on the children's book industry. You will also have an opportunity to browse potential books that could be included in your digital exhibit in order to select the one that you will use for your assignment.

Notes (Optional)

This is a space for you to take notes on information that Juli McLoone will present on the history of book publishing. There may be components of book publishing history that could be incorporated into your assignment. In addition, if you hear something that interests you, you might want to highlight it here in order to look for books with this characteristic when browsing potential books later in class.

Book Exploration/Rotations

Rotation 1

Which book(s) on this table would you be interested in working with this semester? What is the Book Number for this book? Why do you want to work with this book? Consider also taking a picture of the book cover to remind you of the book later.

If you work with this book, what do you need to know in order to complete your assignment successfully? What else do you need to know in order to write a good label?

Rotation 2

Which book(s) on this table would you be interested in working with this semester? What is the Book Number for this book? Why do you want to work with this book? Consider also taking a picture of the book cover to remind you of the book later.

If you work with this book, what do you need to know in order to complete your assignment successfully? What else do you need to know in order to write a good label?

Rotation 3

Which book(s) on this table would you be interested in working with this semester? What is the Book Number for this book? Why do you want to work with this book? Consider also taking a picture of the book cover to remind you of the book later.

If you work with this book, what do you need to know in order to complete your assignment successfully? What else do you need to know in order to write a good label?

Preparing for Next Time

What I Know (Consider What You Know from Class and/or Your Book Rotation Experience)	What I Learned (Review Your Book Publishing Notes and/or Other Info from Your Class)	What I Need to Learn (Review Your Book Rotation Questions—This Will Help Focus Your Research Next Time We Meet)
Example I know that I want to work with a book by Charles Perrault	Example The time period in which a book is published will influence many factors of the book including the illustrations	Example Who was Charles Perrault? How did the era in which he created books influence his work and this text specifically?