



## Emphasizing Our Humanity: Interorganizational Collaboration in the DCN during COVID and into the future

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### Abstract

Collaboration provides an opportunity to address issues more comprehensively than what is possible by individuals or groups in isolation. Large-scale collaborations, such as those occurring within a network of institutions, can present immense opportunities to solve problems that transcend the local nuances of individual institutions. As we have been reflecting on the experience of collaboration, we wondered—what is the glue that can hold together an intricate web of relationships to meet shared goals or address various challenges? In this column, we draw on four levels of interorganizational collaboration (Schrujfer 2021) to assist with organizing and capturing our lived experiences, to center and celebrate the humanity at the core of data curation.

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## Introduction

Collaboration provides an opportunity to address issues more comprehensively than what is possible by individuals or groups in isolation. Large-scale collaborations, such as those occurring within a network of institutions, can present immense opportunities to solve problems that transcend the local nuances of individual institutions. Collaborative solutions, though, can also present challenges requiring acknowledgement, participation and patience to resolve. It is natural to assume problems exist only on a personal/interpersonal level, but that ignores a complex interplay of impacts ranging from what is local and personal to the greater collective experiences we share broadly among human populations.

It's difficult to envision this complex web of interactions without some sort of roadmap. The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology* provides a model of four layers to consider within the dynamics of interorganizational collaboration: 1) Individuals and their interpersonal relationships; 2) Organizations represented by individuals and interorganizational relationships enacted by these representatives; 3) A group of these individuals/representatives dealing with here-and-now group dynamics; 4) The larger societal context (Schruijer 2021). We found this model useful to approach seeing the nuances within our network's collaborations, which we'll describe in further detail. However, we only use the general concept of the model as a guiding framework to help us ground our experiences and this shouldn't be mistaken for a rigorous approach or use.

As we have been reflecting on the experience of collaboration, we wondered—what is the glue that can hold together an intricate web of relationships to meet shared goals or address various challenges? In this column, we draw on this model, the four levels of interorganizational collaboration, to assist with organizing and capturing our lived experiences, to center and celebrate the humanity at the core of data curation.

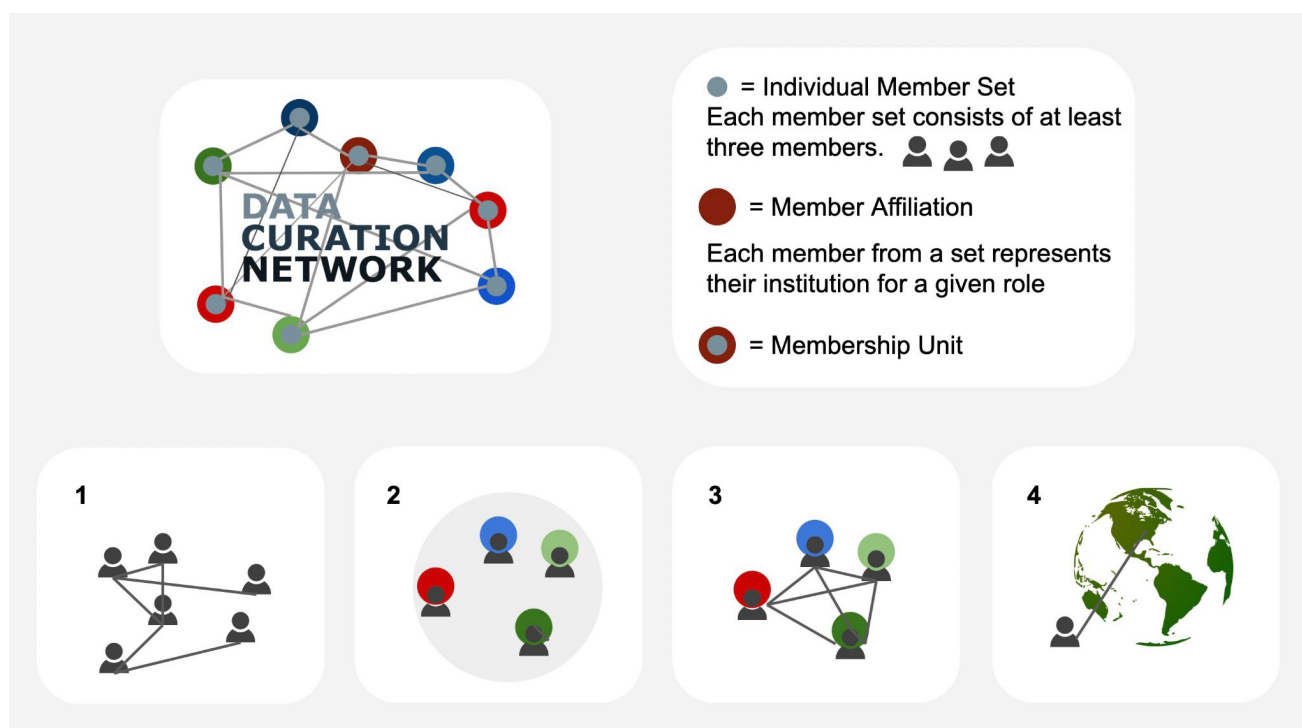
## Who and what are the DCN?

The [Data Curation Network](#) (DCN) at its heart is a community of practice that leverages a cross-institutional staffing model for curating research data. Members have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience curating datasets, as well as submit datasets to the shared data curation service for curation by an expert in the community. DCN members may additionally participate in educational opportunities and network-formed groups, engage in grounded empirical research, and in consultation with governance members may represent the DCN within national and international collaborations. One of the hallmarks of the DCN is what we've termed "radical interdependence:" relying on one another to share resources, time, and expertise to collaboratively curate datasets, engage in peer-to-peer learning, and grounding our work in trust, vulnerability, and shared ownership (Blake et al. 2022).

The DCN began its planning phase in 2016 and launched its shared data curation service in 2019 with eight member institutions and 20 network curators (Coburn and Johnston 2020). DCN was always conceived of as a remote solution given that participating institutions are spread out geographically. However,

in-person planning meetings, adjacent projects (e.g., DCN workshops, research projects) and yearly all hands meetings, in addition to other in-person networking events, allowed early participants to solidify interpersonal relationships beyond video conferencing calls. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded DCN Specialized Data Curation Workshops were held in-person between 2018-2019, and particularly allowed an in-person learning and bonding experience that extended beyond the network itself into an external community of collaborators, some of whom would later join the network as members.

Let's return to the interorganizational collaborative model to help describe who participates in the DCN. The membership-funded network consists of participating institutions who provide individual members that serve as administrative representatives and/or network curators. Going through the model's layers in order: (1) These individuals will experience interpersonal relationships through this work. (2) They represent their institutions and will interact based on these professional roles. (3) They also participate with and represent groups formed within the network or that participate upon its behalf in external communities. (4) All of this is impacted by larger societal contexts.



**Figure 1:** An illustration showing dynamics of interorganizational collaboration (Schrujijer 2021), as applied within DCN: 1. Each member has unique interpersonal relationships within DCN. 2. Members have institutional affiliations that impact and enrich group interactions within DCN. 3. Groups within DCN have unique dynamics. 4. Each member is also impacted by events in their communities and the world.

## Reflecting on the Network during the global “Dumpster Fire”<sup>1</sup>

In reflecting on the network, specifically from March 2020 to now, the DCN has grappled with the different dynamics of interorganizational collaboration. We explore some of these below, but want to be clear that these descriptions are filtered through the lens of the authors of this piece: Community experiences are deeply personal, subjective, and not necessarily experienced by everyone in the same way.

A little over a year after launching a shared curation workflow, in March 2020, COVID-19 emerged in the United States and around the world. This was followed by a number of other distressing events that were made more visible through our screens during lockdown. In addition to fears of catching a deadly virus, we witnessed intense displays of police brutality, there were peaceful protests for change while extremists rioted in our cities and capital, political polarizations deepened causing mistrust, economic disparities showed we were not all in this together, climate change accelerated, and its effects grew more apparent in the form of frequent natural disasters.

Despite all of the upsetting things happening in the world, everyone was expected to carry on as usual. But there were challenges to working from home during lockdown (for those who could) while caring for loved ones; or conversely, to being completely isolated from friends, family and other human connections for the duration. Those challenges were visible in virtual meetings when family members, children, or pets demanded the attention of our colleagues; and when colleagues might be the only humans we encountered each day. But in addition to these very real challenges, remote work also provided a tether to our professional communities. For many, our professional lives became spaces providing kindness, support, and purpose outside of the home. Interpersonal ties that were forged before lockdown remained particularly strong, but there was also opportunity to welcome new connections into our virtual spaces.

During this time, in addition to the individual relationships between members, the DCN provided more opportunities to participate with internal groups and represent the community in external settings. This was manifested in learning opportunities (e.g., remote workshops, learning how to curate a new type of dataset, etc.) and the work of Special Interest Groups (SIGs). SIGs within the DCN produced research outputs on the value of curation, created primers on curating human participants data, explored institutional outreach and communication, and investigated racial justice and other ethical considerations for our work. Some interest groups welcomed participation from a few interested colleagues outside of the network who had been workshop attendees or former DCN members. Outputs in the form of Data Curation Primers from the third DCN Workshop cohort (i.e., the external community) and some produced internally by members of the DCN were completed with grace periods and understanding for everyone’s wellbeing. It might be considered that openness, inclusion and community support within the network made it a desired collaboration space, in addition to being a known collective of curatorial expertise and advocacy.

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1 The unofficial mascot of 2020, a character that resonated with many of us, was an [adorable dumpster fire](#).

March 2020 to October 2021 was also a time of huge change for the DCN. The organization was preparing to transition away from grant funding provided by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to a self-sustaining membership model in 2021-22 fiscal year. Part of that transition was the development of a wholly new organizational and governance structure, which necessitated institutional buy-in to continue supporting member engagement. There was some friction as we navigated the possibility (and reality) of valued participants leaving our community if institutions would not support the new fee structure. Key personnel were also reassessing their capacity for participation in the DCN or leaving their institutions and the network altogether for new opportunities. All of these efforts were further impacted by changes in the DCN's leadership and staffing. As much as this period brought difficult transitions and challenges, the network still saw growth in the form of new sustaining members and participants who have brought an abundance of energy, enthusiasm, new ideas, and new understandings of what the network is, and what it could be.

### **Connections enhance community experiences**

Every year, the DCN hosts an All Hands Meeting, which is an opportunity for the network members to connect with one another, celebrate the successes of the previous year, and plan for the coming year. Before 2020, these events were held in person, but in 2020 and subsequent years they have been held virtually. At the most recent event, in June 2022, attendees were asked to respond to a poll to better understand what projects they wanted to see the DCN tackle in the next year. The overwhelming majority wanted the DCN to focus on education efforts, including developing more primers and workshops, facilitating "Peer Comparison" sessions in which members can discuss their challenges and practices about specific topics, and other resource development.

This response appeared to support the idea that what the DCN community values the most about the DCN is the community itself. It is worth noting that the community has always been a priority of the DCN: Coburn and Johnston (2020) found that more than half of DCN curators most valued being a part of the community. We highlight this to demonstrate that connection is not a new sentiment in the DCN: more that, as we the organization continue to grow and develop, we need to continue centering the community and humanity at the heart of the DCN. Anecdotally, the DCN Education Committee had multiple inquiries from former workshop attendees and others regarding participating in events, primer creation and enhancements, or other collaborations. The external DCN community participants were invited to take part in some of the virtual All Hands Meeting activities in 2020-21 and some participate in the network's community groups. The desire to belong to a community of practice for research data curation extends beyond the network itself, and the DCN will need to continue providing learning, research, and community engagement opportunities alone and in conjunction with other professional associations.

As our network continues to grow and we make space for members and non-members alike, what has been essential and will remain critical to our work are the numerous trust-based structures we have established (Carlson et al. 2023, 27). These include structures that support our community in engaging with one another

and the network as an entity, that establish and reify trust. This includes resources like a [Code of Conduct](#) and [shared governance model](#) (DCN 2022a), but it also includes opportunities to connect with one another around special interest groups, our peer comparisons, or in collaboratively developing shared values. Opportunities to connect with others beyond the network can enhance trust, foster collaborations, improve data curation practices, and advocate support for data curators.

### **Better together through Being Together**

The DCN supports and empowers one another to participate in something bigger than ourselves, bigger than just one institution. It provides the ability to collaborate both nationally and internationally towards common goals, the expertise for curatorial assistance and training, and opportunities for leadership and professional development. While we can and do work on these things at our institutions, collaboration leverages the collective, pooled expertise and economies of scale to be more efficient with our time. Together, we can create recommended practices for data curation that serve the wider research data management community; share tools and workflows for curating larger datasets of increasing size and complexity; articulate metadata schema and standards that are most impactful for interoperability; advocate as a collective to respond to requests for comments (e.g., [Response to Cultural Proficiencies For Racial Equity: A Framework](#); [Response to Publishers' Repository Section Criteria or Features](#)); and respond to various policies, memos, and mandates (e.g., [Response to Nelson Memo](#); DCN 2022b).

The Data Curation Network has consistently drawn attention to the importance of the human aspect of curation. However, to get the network up and running during the grant period, we also spent much attention on metrics. Metrics are an important tool to illustrate value to our institutions, but there are limits to what it can show. Traditional DCN-focused curation metrics do not take into account all of the datasets curated locally at our institutions, the informal support received over slack and email and the educational opportunities that enabled better local curation. As we grow and mature, it is essential that we can continue to nurture trust and accountability within the different types of relationships both internal and external to the network. Practicing compassion and being present for one another will ensure survival through many possible challenges.

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## Competing Interests

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