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Teaching librarians' experiences of individual and shared agency: The lens of librarian relationships and workplace culture

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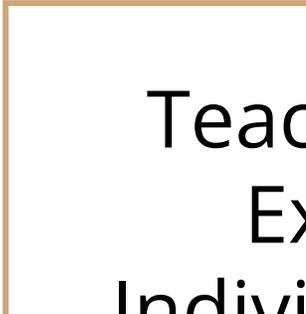


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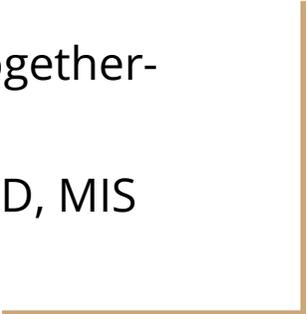
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Teaching Librarians'
Experiences of
Individual and Shared
Agency:
The Lens of Librarian
Relationships and
Workplace Culture

2024 Library Instruction Together-
Virtual Conference
May 22, 2024
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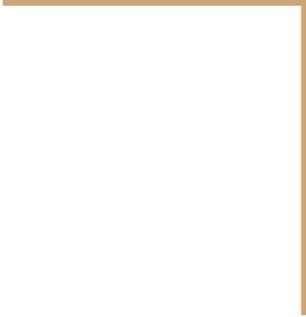


Opening individual reflection

- What do you think of when you hear the phrase “teacher agency”?
- What role do your professional relationships and interactions play in your experiences of teacher agency?

Session overview

- Introduction of an ecological model of teacher agency
- Study focus and key findings related to librarian relationships
- Inviting further dialogue and looking to related literature
- Discussion



An Ecological Model of Teacher Agency



Agency

- Agency as the capacity to act and have an effect on one's environment
- Debates in sociology and related fields about the concept of agency and the tension between individual "agents" and social structures
- Agency may be individual or shared
- Psychological research on agency shows its importance for wellbeing, including in the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Hökkä et al, 2017; Deci et al., 1991)

An ecological model of teacher agency

- Agency is experienced and enacted by interconnected individuals and groups, rather than being something that autonomous individuals either possess or lack
- Agency is continually in flux and embedded within a social context and a moment in space and time

(see Priestley et al., 2016)

This Study



Teacher agency

- Defined in this study as: the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles
- Conceptions of teacher agency evolving, with growing attention to social environment and relationships: an “ecological model” of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2016)

Teacher agency research study: 3 parts

Online survey on academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency; results reported on in three articles:

1. Conceptions of and affective orientations toward teacher agency
2. The role of librarian-faculty relations in experiences of teacher agency
- 3. The role of librarian relationships in experiences of teacher agency**

Survey questions (1/2)

- In what ways do you experience agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to your sense of agency?
- In what ways do you experience lacking agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to this?

Survey questions (2/2)

- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you experience a greater sense of agency?
- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you manage experiences of lacking agency?
- Does the concept of teacher agency evoke for you certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings?



Study Findings:
Teacher Agency &
Librarian Relationships



Key finding: Affective orientations

- All but one participant expressed overall positive affective orientations toward the concept of agency.
- Almost all participants identified challenges with enacting teacher agency.
- Many expressed ambivalence about the degree to which teacher agency is possible for instruction librarians.

Participants' references to interaction with others

- faculty: 82.2% (60/73)
- students: 38.4% (28/73)
- **other librarians: 45.2% (33/73)**

Key finding: Individual and shared agency

- Most participants focused mainly on individual agency.
- The majority (75.3%) also described teacher agency as having the potential to be shared.
- Individual agency heavily influenced by relationships, social interactions, and environment.

Participant descriptions of work relationships and environments fostering and/or hindering agency

- 19.2% (14/73): supported agency (no mention of agency being hindered)
- 11.0% (8/73): hindered agency (no mention of agency being fostered)
- 6.9% (5/73): both fostered and hindered agency

Influential conditions and experiences

- Mutual support, care, and open communication fostered teacher agency
- Informal interactions and conversations among colleagues
- Formalized collaborations
- Working together toward a shared goal
- Experience of collective agency as having greater power to influence institutional culture and positive change

Sense of collectivism

- Those who described collective agency usually viewed it positively.
- Collectivism was evident in use of third-person plural pronouns like *we* and *our* (37.0% of participants).
- First-person plural pronouns (*we, our*) almost always used in a positive context

Teacher agency as collective

- “**Our sense of community** is a big part of feeling agency - that I am trusted to make decisions for my role and that I'll be supported in that.”
- “[W]e have **procedural and systemic agency in our work** which obviates the need to try to manufacture a sense of agency where any is lacking.”

Solace in solidarity

“[N]o matter what is in place and what culture we try to perpetuate in the library, sometimes things happen that make you feel devalued as a professional or like a library instruction vending machine where faculty just insert a token and press in what they want and you deliver. ... When that happens, having like-minded colleagues to talk to is helpful.”

Balancing individual and collective agency (1/2)

- Collective agency among librarians usually viewed positively, but sometimes required compromise that was frustrating and that limited individual agency.
- Many nonetheless saw such compromises as worthwhile when decisions were made collectively.

Balancing individual and collective agency (2/2)

Many who described individual teaching as connected to collective goals noted the importance of balancing individual and shared approaches. Some stressed need to allow flexibility in how individuals approached work that was connected to a shared goal.

Influential role of managers and supervisors

Several described managers' strong influence over their capacity to enact agency, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

“On a personal level, I had to fight very hard to gain personal agency in instruction in my department. My largest barrier was my immediate supervisor, who often refuses to delegate or monopolizes tasks that are considered ‘important.’ ... [Others] fought a similar battle.”

Managers and leadership as potential advocates

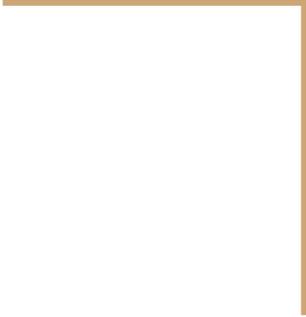
Two participants with supervisory experience stressed the responsibility of library managers and leaders to advocate for librarians' teacher agency, including through:

- Messaging to others in the library and the institution about librarians' roles, work, and value
- Fostering work environments of mutual trust, support, and valuing of colleagues' expertise
- Recognizing social and structural barriers to librarians' capacities to enact agency

Manager philosophies of advocacy

“As the head of instruction for many years, I have worked to create an environment where librarians who teach know they are empowered to make decisions about their teaching in collaboration with faculty with whom they work. ... the library has their back if there are complaints about this.”

“Our overall philosophy that we are partnering with faculty and have our own expertise creates a sense of agency.”



Further Analysis & Implications



The presence or absence of community

- Sense of community and mutual support nurture positive experiences of both individual agency and collective agency.
- Lack thereof can have the reverse effect.

Community within and beyond a workplace

Value of building a sense of community with colleagues

- Ideally found and built within our institutions
- Community beyond individual institutions is also powerful, and especially important when the potential for community within a workplace is limited.

Balancing shared and individual goals and approaches

Library instruction teams' shared projects ideally are:

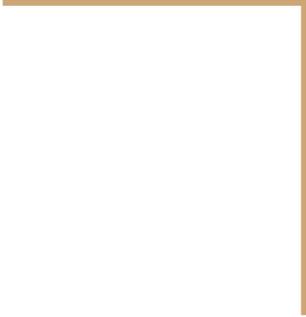
- grounded in shared goals and values
- designed with some flexibility that enables a balancing of shared goals and unique teaching approaches

Library leadership as potential advocates

- Library leadership and management often highly influential in participants' experiences of being able/unable to enact agency
- Library leadership can be powerful advocates for teaching librarians when they affirm librarians' positions as educators with unique expertise and skills.

Individual reflection

- In what ways do these findings connect to your own experiences?
- Do your experiences differ from certain findings?



Looking to Related Literature & Inviting
Further Dialogue



Acknowledgment of affective experience in (instruction) librarianship

- Increased attention to the emotional labor of instruction librarianship (e.g., Schuler & Morgan, 2013; Evans & Sobel, 2021)
- Increased challenges to “vocational awe” and to silence about unsupportive and inequitable workplace conditions (Fobazi, 2018)
- Alternatives to the neoliberal university of efficiency and ROI. For example:
 - Feminist librarianship and care (e.g., Accardi, 2013; Bruce, 2020)
 - Slow librarianship and challenges to the ongoing push to “innovate” (e.g., Glassman, 2017; Farkas, 2023)

Research on workplace toxicity in libraries

- Widespread workplace dysfunction and toxic leadership in libraries, which disproportionately impacts librarians from historically minoritized groups
(e.g., Kendrick and Damasco, 2019; Kendrick, Leftwich, & Hodge, 2021)
- Devaluing of library instruction work and “caring” professions, lower social status of instruction librarians
(e.g., Douglas and Gadsby, 2019; Douglas and Gadsby, 2020; Sloniowski, 2016)

Communities of practice (CoPs): Potential models for supportive culture

- CoPs stress the social dimensions of learning, especially in a shared knowledge domain; peers learn with and from one another (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
- Sense of community and sense of belonging vital to CoPs (Nistor et al., 2015)
- Growing interest in CoPs for librarians (e.g., Bilodeau and Carson, 2014; Lewitzky, 2020)

Critique in support of positive change

- All of this work envisions the potential for healthier, more supportive, and more inclusive workplaces.
- Drawing attention to these issues can serve as a call for action.

Value in collectively exploring...

(1/2)

- ways to foster both individual and collective agency, and to balance the two
- ways to foster desirable work and teaching environments and ways
- investigating implicit assumptions that librarians may bring to instructional work

Value in collectively exploring...

(2/2)

- expanded possibilities for how librarians approach their instructional roles and work environments and relationships
- ways to prevent burnout and cultivate communities and cultures of care

The three articles on this study

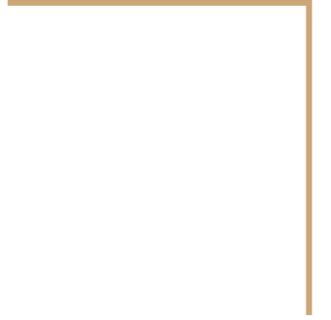
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Discussion



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