

Caring for Your Community of Practice: Collective Responses to Burnout

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What could your community look like if everyone was adequately cared for and nurtured? Every aspect of instruction librarianship requires the performance of emotional labor. In cultures of overwork, this emotional labor is not reciprocated, leaving library workers at risk of burnout. While a growing body of literature suggests individual strategies for performing self-care to mitigate these negative effects, care cannot exist in a vacuum. As we considered our own experiences, the experiences of our colleagues, and the body of literature on emotional labor and burnout in academic libraries, we found common threads through all of those contexts and would summarize them as follows:

We, as a profession, are tired and burned out. We, as a profession, believe we're doing good work, but the "goodness" of work does not necessarily fill our hearts or our wallets. We, as a profession, are seeking to mitigate the feelings of burnout, but the question is: how?

We propose that caring for our communities can be sustaining, not draining. In an interactive workshop at LOEX, we examined the organizational and structural forces that cause burnout, and introduced community care as a way to nurture our communities and ourselves. Our learning outcomes were that participants will:

1. Define self-care and community care at a sociopolitical level in order to acknowledge the structures of power that impact mental health and contribute to teaching burnout.
2. Recognize the relationship between teaching and community care in order to identify strategies that can be implemented locally.
3. Create a zine as a learning artifact in order to develop a reflective practice for continuing self-care.

In our workshop, we sought to create a space for education, validation, and vulnerability. Using a zine as a reflective teaching tool, we asked participants to reflect on their own work contexts and consider how they could begin to develop a culture of community care at their institutions.

Context and Challenges

Over the past two years, our library has undergone significant organizational change. We noticed staff sharing experiences of low morale and burnout, problems which were especially acute for research and instruction librarians navigating the demands of public service work (Kendrick, 2017). Our department maintains a generally collaborative and collegial environment, but we saw our community of practice feeling stressed and wanted to find a way that we—two librarians without managerial status—could help.

Scholarly literature offers at best an incomplete picture. While burnout can have a negative impact on performance at work, we wanted to take a more holistic approach that centered wellbeing and focused on the person rather than their productivity. Work that does take this approach, however, is not always represented in scholarship nor does it always conform to

expectations of academic outputs. Women of color, particularly Black and Brown women in social justice spaces, have long been doing vital care and healing work (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2016). As white folks writing in a profession that is 88% white (ALA Diversity Counts, 2012) it is crucial to approach caring for our communities in ways that respect and do not co-opt the movements from which we are trying to learn. Rather, our aim was to bring together a series of ideas and practices that could inform our approaches to supporting one another.

Emotional Labor and Burnout

As teaching librarians, we perform a great deal of emotional labor, which is the work of regulating and suppressing one's own feelings in order to "appropriately" respond to another person's needs, often in the context of a power differential (Grandey, 2000, p. 95). This manifests in our interactions with students and faculty (Sloniowski, 2016, pp. 659-660). Our work with students encompasses not only helping them find the best research for their papers, but also the affective domain: we help them make appointments with the writing center or the counseling center, hand them tissues when they cry, and sometimes serve as safe adults with whom they can share their problems. While stressed out students may see us as safe adults to cry in front of, stressed out faculty can view us as people on whom they can vent their frustrations. We cannot deny the effects that these aspects of our jobs have on our health and well-being, especially given the burnout that can occur as a result (Julien & Genius, 2009, p. 931; Kendrick, 2017, pp. 855-856; Matteson & Miller, 2013 p. 60).

Burnout encompasses persistent feelings of exhaustion and negativity resulting from the demands and stressors of work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter., 2001, pp. 402-403). This is especially a problem for librarians who teach because we navigate a unique set of circumstances in our work lives (Sheesley, 2001, p. 448). Much of our day-to-day work is spent in negotiation: negotiating what work we will prioritize over other things, negotiating our time when it comes to reference desk shifts and student consultations, and negotiating with faculty around what, when and where we teach. This seemingly endless series of negotiations can undermine our feelings of confidence and expertise. Moreover, much of our work is done in silos which sometimes consist of just one person. Teaching can be incredibly isolating, particularly for new librarians who are working to develop their teaching skills. We write learning outcomes alone, design activities alone, and teach behind a closed door. We reflect, review assessments, and enter statistics alone. How can we build communities of practice when our work is often done in isolation?

Vocational awe, the idea that libraries are inherently good and beyond critique, exacerbates these challenges (Ettarh, 2018). Vocational awe promotes the narrative that our work is *always* good, and therefore we should *always* feel good doing it, meaning that the individual must be the problem if they feel differently. Add in the further complication that the work of teaching librarians is highly gendered, and a fuller picture of the challenges teaching librarians face is revealed (Douglas & Gadsby, 2017). We are at an acute risk of burnout because of

complex and compounding factors, and the isolation of our work means we often feel that we are alone in our burnout; that *we* are the problem that needs solving.

Structural Challenges

We live in a social, political, and economic moment that rewards isolation and discourages care. Relations of neoliberal capitalism are structured to maintain a power dynamic that benefits those who are already privileged at the expense of everyone else (Harvey, 2016, 2007; Duggan, 2003). As Jessica Schomberg observes, “toxic individualism creates conditions in which precarity grows. Precarity depends on keeping people separated and focused on taking care of themselves above all else. It structurally privileges those labeled as white and abled” (2018, p.119). Library burnout is connected to unstable working conditions, a culture of individualism, and expectations of resilience--the prevailing idea that one should be able to do more with less resources and no help (Schomberg, 2018, p.119; Galvan, Berg, & Tewell, 2017). The pressure on individuals means that solutions to these problems are framed on an individual scale, and a commonly proposed “solution” is self-care.

Self-Care and Community Care

Conversations about self-care almost always refer to Audre Lorde’s now-famous quote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (1988, p.131). This quote is often used to justify the practices of consumption in isolation that have come to represent mainstream aesthetics of self-care, for example purchasing skincare products and using them alone in one’s own home and then posting about these activities on social media. While it is important to attend to one’s physical needs, this narrative of performance largely overlooks the context in which Lorde was writing (her position as a Black lesbian feminist poet activist and librarian is central to her work), as well as the broader oppressive systems that render self-care necessary. In her analysis of Lorde’s writing, Sara Ahmed notes “This kind of self-care is not about one’s own happiness. It is about finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing” (2014).

While it’s true for some that survival under capitalism is an inherently radical act, individual action is not a sustainable response to structural issues. Despite the cultural messages we receive, we do not have to bear our burdens or fix unjust systems alone. Moreover, caring is not a binary: it is possible to derive emotional sustenance by caring for oneself and one’s community simultaneously.

So let’s pause for a moment: “There is such urgency in the multitude of crises we face, it can make it hard to remember that in fact it is urgency thinking (urgent constant unsustainable growth) that got us to this point, and that our potential success lies in doing deep, slow, intentional work” (brown, 2017, p. 114). This work cannot happen in isolation.

Community care is the opposite of toxic individualism: “By focusing on the bigger picture of our communities we can see that we are not alone and that we can help each other face similar problems. Intentional community care can create an environment that promotes satisfaction rather than burnout or precocity” (Schomberg, 2018, p.119). In social justice movements, “community care means liberation for those of us who struggle alone, fearing the burden we place on others” (Jones, 2017). Fostering communities of care will not necessarily solve

the structural problems we face, but facing problems together and offering support can be an effective way of not only coping, but finding meaning. When burnout is connected to the structure in which we work, turning to that structure will not provide a solution (Audre Lorde Project, n.d.). Thus, we define community care as giving and receiving care in ways that support shared wellbeing and connectedness, particularly amidst shared struggles.

Community Care at our Library

At the beginning of this paper and our workshop, we asked ourselves what our community could look like if everyone was cared for and nurtured. Strategies for realizing that vision in our library have required varying amounts of effort to plan and implement. The Wall of Awesome, a series of large sticky notes with smaller sticky notes for people to publicly post colleagues’ successes, is a low effort, high reward example. One of our colleagues has a trained therapy dog that she brings to the library for staff to visit with twice a year, and others have organized Cookiefest, an event held during the winter holiday season when people volunteer to bake cookies and library staff spend an afternoon enjoying them and one another’s company. We have piloted one-song dance parties on Friday afternoons (which was met with a mixed reception!) and have organized a library team to play in the university staff softball league this summer. Most importantly, we have worked to build a culture of checking in: not just checking in to see if a project has been completed or statistics collected, but rather asking how a coworker is doing and sincerely wanting to know the answer. Without building a culture in which we are concerned with our colleagues’ holistic well-being, any community care initiatives we tried would most certainly have failed. We check in with our community when people seem stressed or upset, but also when they have news to celebrate. We support and uplift in equal measure.

Conversations and Future Directions

The conversations we heard during the small group discussions in our LOEX workshop made our hearts hurt but feel full at the same time: so many of us are facing similar challenges, but when given space to share and be vulnerable, people opened up to one another with care and authenticity. When we opened the floor for discussion, the questions participants asked were thorny: What do you do when you’re new to an organization and don’t have power to create change? How do you change a workplace culture where there is clearly legacy ill will between coworkers? Doesn’t it require a lot of emotional labor to create a culture of community care? Our responses were that yes, it does require a certain measure of emotional labor to begin building a culture of community care but that the care we have received in return has made that effort worth it. Finding someone with whom to begin this work can help alleviate some of the emotional labor, and modeling community care with just one colleague can be the first step in that ethos spreading to others in the organization (brown, 2017, p. 159; Fargo, 2019). Dealing with legacy issues, or issues where all conversations tend to end up emotionally charged, doesn’t have one easy answer, but sometimes reaching out with kindness to a particularly challenging coworker can be a great first step. Ultimately, community care recognizes that we are all people, and caring for/being cared for by people holistically can improve our work life immensely.

After the LOEX session was over, we received very posi-

tive feedback from attendees in person and on Twitter. Many attendees expressed a desire to continue the conversation and an appreciation that we had made space for challenging conversations. We asked our attendees and are also asking our readers with power at their institutions to consider the following:

- How can you leverage your power to help people who do not have institutional power?
- Gauge the emotional climate of your workplace frequently and intentionally: check on your team!
- If you're not sure what the emotional climate is, find out: ask staff how they are doing & what they need to feel supported.
- Remember that people can't do their jobs well (or at all) if they don't feel safe and supported. As a manager, it's your responsibility to foster a culture of kindness, trust and respect.
- Use your position to advocate for material and cultural changes to improve your staff's wellbeing: fair wages, comfortable and accessible workspaces, modeling work-life balance, specifically discouraging overwork, encouraging workers to take the sick time and vacation time to which they are entitled, etc.

Creating a culture of community care requires naming the challenges we face, both personally and structurally, and acknowledging the impact they have on our health and wellbeing. As Ahmed writes,

And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other (2014).

It requires being vulnerable in space that has traditionally been hostile to vulnerability, and extending a hand to colleagues who may have rejected support in the past. It requires empathy, kindness and understanding: a willingness to uplift and to support. It requires work, but that work is rewarded with a community of practice that truly cares as much for teaching librarians as it does for its students and faculty.

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