The Role of Librarian Relationships in Academic Instruction Librarians' Experiences of Teacher Agency

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abstract: This article is the third and last of a multi-part study on academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency in relation to their instructional work. Based on the findings of an online survey of academic instruction librarians, this final article concentrates on the role that librarian relationships play in academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency. The findings illustrate the importance of supportive workplace cultures and workplace relationships in instruction librarians' capacities to enact individual and collective agency in their instructional roles. The findings have implications for instruction librarians and library organizations that endeavor to foster workplaces in which instruction librarians are valued and supported by one another and by their institutions.

Introduction

Teacher agency has been long understood in the field of education as essential to teachers' professional development and practice, though conceptions of what teacher agency is and why it matters vary. In this study, *agency* was defined as "the ability of an individual and / or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments," and *teacher agency* was defined as "the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles."

Often the meaning of the term *agency* is assumed to be known without being defined, despite that definitions of agency and teacher agency have been a topic of debate. While a more traditional view of teacher agency emphasizes individual teachers as active agents

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with control and effectiveness in the classroom, in recent decades more attention has been given to an ecological model of teacher agency.[1] The ecological model of teacher agency, upon which this study is based, works from the understanding that the enactment of agency is shaped and experienced through interactions among actors and their environments. From this perspective, agency is continually in flux rather than being something that an individual either possesses or lacks. Agency is in dynamic relationship with the social and material environment, and experienced less by autonomous "agents" than by interconnected individuals and groups.[2] The recognition of teacher agency as embedded within environments and systems draws on a longer tradition in sociology and philosophy that examines the interconnections among individuals, groups, and social structures and systems. Such work also demonstrates that agency can be experienced both individually and collectively.

Although little has been written explicitly about the role of teacher agency in academic instruction librarians' work, much of the library literature engages with questions of teacher agency. For example, ongoing critiques of the one-shot model of library instruction frequently point to the lack of time and choice that teaching librarians have when working with a class for only one session that is usually centered on locating sources for a research assignment.[3] Examinations of librarian-faculty relations often underscore the unequal power dynamics that frequently characterize these connections and that may need to be challenged in order to foster more equal partnerships in which librarians' expertise are more fully recognized and valued.[4] While a fair amount has been written about the influence of librarian-faculty relations on librarians' teaching experiences and practices, less has been said about the role that librarians' relationships to one another play in their teaching. Nonetheless, librarians' relationships to one another and to their library work environments are key parts of the ecologies that influence academic instruction librarians' experiences of teacher agency.

While a fair amount has been written about the influence of librarian-faculty relations on librarians' teaching experiences and practices, less has been said about the role that librarians' relationships to one another play in their teaching.

This article is the third and last of a multi-part study on academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency in relation to their instructional work. The findings are based on the results of an online survey of academic instruction librarians who reported on their conceptions and experiences of teacher agency within the context of their library instruction roles. This article concentrates on the role that librarian relationships play in academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency. The first article focused on librarians' affective orientations toward the concept of teacher agency and their experiences of teacher agency within the context of their library instruction roles. The second article concentrated on the role of librarian-faculty relations in librarians' experiences of teacher agency.

The Survey and Previous Findings

The survey, conducted in winter 2021, consisted of five open-ended questions about participants' experiences of agency within their instructional roles as librarians. These questions related to factors that contributed to, or detracted from, a sense of teacher agency; strategies, approaches, and ideas that helped the 73 participants to experience greater teacher agency; and thoughts, ideas, and feelings that participants associated with the concept of teacher agency. In order to establish with participants a shared general understanding of the study's focus, the survey required participants to read the following explanations of *agency* and *teacher agency*:

- agency: "the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments"
- teacher agency: "the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles"

After these definitions were provided, participants were presented with five open-ended questions about their experiences of agency in the context of their library instruction work. The survey is described in greater detail in the Methods section. The survey introduction and questions did not explicitly distinguish between individual agency (an individual's capacity to act and make choices) and collective agency (a group's capacity to act and make choices together). However, conceptions of teacher agency as individual and/or as potentially collective (shared with others) are central to this study's findings.

As was reported in this study's first and second articles, participants usually conceived of teacher agency in terms of individual agency. At the same time, participants' experiences of teacher agency were greatly influenced by their relationships and interactions with others. As was reported in the two previous articles, in participants' descriptions of their experiences of teacher agency or the lack thereof, 82.2 percent referenced their relationships to faculty, 45.2 percent referenced their relationships to other librarians, and 38.4 percent mentioned their relationships to students. Moreover, despite most participants' main focus on individual agency, the majority of participants (75.34 percent) also described teacher agency having the potential to be shared to some extent with other educators.

As was reported in the first article, most participants expressed overall positive feelings about the concept of teacher agency and experiences in which they were able to enact teacher agency, whether individually or collectively. Conversely, participants expressed negative emotions about experiences of being unable to enact teacher agency. Some participants questioned the feasibility of librarians enacting teacher agency, in light of their roles as librarians. Virtually all participants expressed the desire to experience meaning and purpose in their instructional work,

Virtually all participants expressed the desire to experience meaning and purpose in their instructional work, and most participants associated such an experience with the concept of teacher agency.

and most participants associated such an experience with the concept of teacher agency. Most participants also recognized the highly relational nature of their instructional work, which could present both possibilities for and challenges to enacting teacher agency.

As reported in the second article, participants' relationships with faculty were especially influential in their conceptions and experiences of teacher agency. Many participants described ways that their individual teacher agency was limited by faculty expectations. At the same time, participants who described enacting agency through collaboration most often described their partnerships with teaching faculty, who were usually the instructors of record for course-integrated library instruction. Shared agency was also sometimes described as possible through mutually supportive librarian-librarian interactions and relationships. This last point is discussed in greater detail in this article's Findings section.

Literature Review

This literature review concentrates on the role of librarian relations in academic instruction librarians' experiences of teacher agency. This includes relationships among fellow instruction librarians, as well as librarians' relationships to other individuals and units within the library such as supervisors, administration, and colleagues who work in other library units. For a more detailed review of the literature on agency and teacher agency, please see this study's first article, which provides background on the concept of agency, as it has been explored in the fields of sociology, psychology, and education.[5] That first article's literature review also includes an overview of the connections among teacher agency, teacher identity, emotion, and the role of teacher agency in academic instruction librarianship. For more context on the relationship between librarians' experiences of teacher agency and librarian-faculty relations, please see the second article's literature review.[6]

The author is unaware of previous research specifically on the role of librarian relations in librarians' experiences of teacher agency. However, there has been research on related issues: library workplace cultures and workplace conditions, the social positions of instruction librarianship within academic libraries and educational institutions, and the relevance of community and sense of belonging to professional and teacher development.

Academic Library Workplace Cultures and Conditions

An examination of library relations necessarily involves consideration of workplace culture and conditions, given the strong interconnections between library workplaces and interpersonal and professional relationships. A growing body of literature examines the culture and conditions of academic library workplaces. Despite the common conception that libraries are bastions for democratic ideals and free thought, the work of scholars like Kaetrena Davis Kendrick; Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and Ione Damasco; Alma Ortega; Spencer Acadia; Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman, and Richard Moniz; and Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman, Rebecca Croxton, and Richard Moniz makes clear that academic library workplaces are frequently far from reaching those ideals.[7] Toxic leadership, bullying, and power struggles are commonplace in these organizations. Ann Glusker et al. articulate

the ways library organizational cultures and management influence library staff morale, often adversely.[8] Referencing the work of Jason Martin, they write, "most academic libraries sit in bureaucracies that breed politics and gamesmanship; in these settings, the best ideas or hardest work may not prevail, decreasing morale."[9] Moreover, as Steven Staninger discusses, the hierarchical nature of libraries contribute to an environment in which those in positions of greater power may misuse that power to oppress others in positions of lesser power, while claiming to be ensuring workplace productivity.[10]

This reality contributes to challenges in retaining library employees in general, as well as in diversifying a predominantly White profession that many librarians of color report experiencing as particularly unwelcoming. Building on Davis Kendrick's work on librarians' experiences of low morale and toxic leadership in academic libraries, Davis Kendrick and Damasco have explored how librarians of color are disproportionately affected by workplace bullying and burnout, and the ways this negatively influences recruitment, promotion, and retention for racial and ethnic minority academic librarians.[11] Expanding on this work, Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, Amanda Leftwich, and Twanna Hodge have suggested individual approaches to self-care and self-preservation that do not depend on structural changes over which individuals have limited control.[12] At a 2021 BIPOC in LIS Mental Health Summit that they offered, these librarians discussed approaches to self-care and self-preservation, such as "establish[ing] or maintain[ing] emotional support systems," "identify[ing] allies and accomplices," and "engag[ing] with others"; and "identify[ing] barriers to boundaries needed for your own wellness."[13] These events were offered in response to the additional challenges that BIPOC librarians experience in library workplaces and which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While Davis Kendrick, Hodge, and Leftwich's recommendations have particular relevance and resonance for BIPOC librarians, they point to power structures and systems that affect all library workers in both shared and unique ways, albeit to varying degrees and in different manifestations. These scholars' examinations of workplace cultures and dynamics may serve as models for critically examining a wide range of library workplace experiences.

Calls to critically examine the culture and labor conditions in libraries point to the need for naming and questioning the "vocational awe" that Ettarh Fobazi identifies as commonplace in librarianship. Fobazi defines vocational awe as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique" and argues that this phenomenon contributes to librarians accepting unjust labor conditions and experiencing low morale and burnout.[14]

The Position of Instruction Librarianship within Academic Libraries and Educational Institutions

A growing body of library literature examines the lower social position and status that instruction librarians within academic libraries and academic institutions frequently occupy. In higher education and in academic libraries, instruction librarianship is frequently devalued, as evidenced in the lower pay of these positions, the limited opportunities for professional advancement within instruction librarianship, high and often

continually increasing workloads, and the more limited recognition generally given to teaching.[15] In contrast, other areas of academic librarianship such as new technologies, digital scholarship, and data services, which are more directly tied to higher institutional recognition and social and financial capital, tend to carry greater prestige, higher pay, and more opportunities for professional advancement.[16] The perceived lower status of academic instruction librarians within their institutions likely contributes to experiences of imposter syndrome and burnout.[17]

Academic instruction librarians have called for stronger institutional support through critiques of the devaluing of library public services and instructional work, which can be characterized in part as "care work" that has historically been done predominantly by women and has been undercompensated and underrecognized.[18] Relatedly, instruction librarian critiques of one-shot library instruction, which is inherently limited in time, scope, and depth, reflect increased frustrations among many instruction librarians with the limitations of their traditional teaching roles.[19] Instruction librarians' increased engagement in critical pedagogy and reflective practice are additional examples of ways that librarians are challenging perceived constraints of traditional library instruction and service models that have commonly positioned librarians as subservient to others. Implicit within library discourse on critical pedagogy and reflective practices is often a desire for academic instruction librarians to feel more agentic, both as a collective group and as individual teachers.[20]

While many instruction librarians report that challenging the predominance of the library one-shot and engaging with critical pedagogy increases their sense of meaning and purpose in teaching, some also argue that critical library instruction has neglected to adequately address librarians' working conditions.[21] These work conditions influence how librarians relate to one another as workers and as colleagues. Rafia Mirza, Karen P. Nicholson, and Maura Seale point to "critical library pedagogy's emphasis on the initiative and agency of individual teachers and students" as carrying the risk of reinforcing "neoliberal subjectivities of performance and merit and exacerbating labor issues endemic to the neoliberal university, such as doing more with less, understaffing, competition, and burnout, thereby working against collective action, solidarity, and equity."[22] As an alternative to an emphasis on the agency of individual teachers and students, Mirza, Nicholson, and Seale instead propose "[r]eframing critical library pedagogy as labor undertaken in solidarity with other workers" as a means through which to reclaim critical pedagogy's "liberatory potential."[23] For these authors, this means in part "moving away from narratives of agency and empowerment toward narratives centered in labor and solidarity."[24] It is worth noting that the authors' uses of the term agency imply a common conception of agency as individual autonomy, rather than a view of agency as potentially collective and relational. In contrast, this study considers agency as a phenomenon that may be experienced both individually and collectively. Mirza, Nicholson, and Seale's vision of worker solidarity could be viewed as aligned with conceptions of collective agency that are often overlooked in much of the discourse about agency.

Jennifer A. Ferretti (whom Mirza et al. reference) offers a critique of critical librarianship that is focused on relationships among librarians. They assert that while critical library pedagogy has positively influenced librarians' teaching, it has done too little to "change power relations between library colleagues," which are not infrequently

characterized by inequities and experiences of marginalization.[25] Ferretti's writing, in line with research by Kendrick and Damasco, indicates that experiences of exclusion are especially common among many librarians of color.[26]

The library scholarship introduced thus far illustrates the importance of examining workplace cultures, structures, and practices with a sensitivity to librarians as workers and social beings and seeking ways to foster genuinely supportive and inclusive workplaces. The cited authors emphasize that such an examination needs to occur on a structural level and needs to be followed by structural changes. While these authors point to the need for library leaders to support and often initiate such changes, they also stress the importance for all library workers to critically examine the systems and cultures in which they work and foster mutually supportive work environments.

Communities of Practice as Microcosms for Building Social and Professional Support

Professional learning among peers can help provide this support. In the context of instruction librarianship, communities of practice (COPs) can cultivate a sense of professional community and belonging as librarians engage in the ongoing process of teacher development.

Of course, changes in organizational culture and structure can occur to many degrees, on many levels, and in different spaces and communities. CoPs, first conceptualized by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, emphasize the social dimensions of learning, particularly in the context of a shared knowledge domain.[27]

Nicolae Nistor et al. discuss the centrality of a sense of community (SoC) in communities of practice. As they note, SoC was conceptualized in terms of group cohesion by David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, who initially defined it as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."[28] Teacher education research also supports the idea that a sense of community is important for teacher development, including the development and maintenance of teacher agency.[29]

Communities of practice have been particularly popular in higher education in the United States among many university faculty and teaching centers, and among some librarians, especially instruction librarians.[30] Edward Bilodeau and Pamela Carson propose CoPs as useful models for academic librarians' professional education.[31] Through structured interviews with librarians about their experiences in library school and as new librarians, the authors found that librarians' professional learning can be characterized as "ongoing and generally self-directed, informal, highly dependent on social interactions with peers, and embedded in practice."[32] Having supportive colleagues and a sense of community therefore may be particularly important for librarians' ongoing professional development. Rachel A. Lewitzky, reviewing the literature on the nature of teaching in academic libraries and librarians' initiatives to grow their teaching abilities, similarly stresses the social dimensions of librarians' development as teachers and the importance of institutional supports such as mentorship programs and ongoing feedback that help to "establish a framework for supporting a community of practice" related to academic library instruction.[33]

The value of a sense of community may be particularly significant in teaching because of the emotional labor involved in such highly relational work.[34] Emotional labor, first conceptualized by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, is the management of emotions in the context of work.[35] For a fuller discussion of the literature on emotional labor and teaching, including library instruction, please see this study's first article.[36]

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency in the context of their instructional work. The study was intended to identify themes and variations in participants' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency. For the study, library instruction work refers to all encompassed activities, including but not limited to scheduling, designing, delivering, assessing, and coordinating instruction/instruction programs. As mentioned previously, the survey consisted of five open-ended questions about participants' experiences of agency, including questions about factors and conditions that contribute to or detract from a sense of teacher agency; strategies, approaches, and ideas that help librarians to experience greater teacher agency; and thoughts, ideas, and feelings that the concept of teacher agency evokes.

The survey was administered through Qualtrics and was open from February 25 to March 25, 2021. On February 25, 2021, an initial invitation to participate in the study was sent to subscribers of the listserv ili-l@lists.ala.org, as well as to the members of ALA Connect's discussion groups "ACRL" (Association of College & Research Libraries) and "ACRL Instruction Section." (ALA Connect is the American Library Association's [ALA] community platform.) A survey reminder was sent through these channels again on March 10, 2021. A total of 73 individuals completed the survey.

The survey began with the following explanation of the term *agency*, as it was used in the context of the study:

> Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments. This study explores librarians' experiences of teacher agency: essentially, the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles. This survey will ask about your experiences of agency in the context of your library instruction work. For the purpose of this survey, library instruction work refers to all encompassed activities, including but not limited to scheduling, designing, delivering, assessing, and coordinating instruction/instruction programs.

Participants were then presented with five open-ended questions about their experiences of agency in the context of their library instruction work (see Table 1).

At the end of the survey, participants were also asked a series of multiple-choice questions about their institutional contexts, teaching experience, and demographics. (See the Appendix for the complete survey.)

Survey responses were analyzed for variations and themes through open coding. A number of broad themes emerged during early stages of coding, including affective orientation toward teacher agency; a spectrum of views of teacher agency as an

Table 1.
Survey Questions

- 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?
- 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?

individual and/or a shared experience; the roles of collaboration and of autonomy in teaching and in experiencing teacher agency; work and institutional culture and environment; interpersonal and professional relationships (with faculty, fellow librarians, and students); and varying modes of instruction such as one-shot classes, credit courses, and assignment design. As mentioned previously, this article focuses on the role of librarian relationships in participants' experiences of teacher agency.

Finding

Participant Demographics

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information about their institution type, the job classification of their current or most recent position, the country in which they worked, age, race or ethnicity, gender, years of experience in library instruction, and other teaching experience. Table 2 presents these demographics. As is discussed later under Limitations, there was a lack of diversity in the study population, particularly in race, ethnicity and gender. The generalizability of the study findings to a more diverse group are uncertain, though this qualitative study also provides insight into individuals' unique experiences as well as common patterns across the participants' experiences.

Key Findings

The central findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Librarian relationships played an important role in many participants' teaching experiences, including in their experiences of teacher agency. Similar to librarian-faculty relations, librarian-librarian relations could foster and/or hinder individual and collective teacher agency.

Table 2.

Participant Demographics

(See the Appendix for all of the gender categories listed in the survey. Some of those categories were not selected by any participants and therefore are not represented in this table.)

Institution type	**Percentage of Participants**
Doctoral-granting research institution	49.3%
Four-year undergraduate college	17.8%
Regional comprehensive university	15.1%
Community or technical college	8.2%
Other	9.6%
Job classification of current or most recent library position	
Tenured or tenure-track	41.1%
Professional staff	30.1%
Non-tenure track faculty	23.3%
Other	5.5%
Country	
United States	97.3%
Canada	2.7%
Age	
30–39	39.7%
50–59	24.7%
40–49	20.5%
18–29	9.6%
60+	5.5%
Race/ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	91.8%
Preferred not to answer	41.3%
Hispanic or Latinx	2.7%
Asian American or Asian	1.4%
Gender	
Female	91.8%
Male	5.5%
Preferred not to answer	2.7%

Years of experience in library instruction	
6–10 years	30.1%
2–5 years	27.4%
16–20 years	15.1%
11–15 years	13.7%
20+ years	11.0%
Under 2 years (at least one year)	2.7%
Other teaching experience	
Yes	56.2%
No	43.8%

2. Participants who described collective (shared) agency among librarians usually described this agency in positive terms. A sense of collectivism was evident in the use of first-person pronouns like *we* and *our* by 37.0 percent of participants. Use of such pronouns was often intertwined with descriptions of interpersonal relationships and work culture and was almost always used in favorable terms.
3. Supportive work environments, and work relationships overall, appeared to foster a positive sense of teacher agency. Participants who described their relationships and interactions with fellow librarians expressed the value of a sense of mutual support, care, and open communication.
4. Participants who described collective agency with fellow librarians usually viewed collective agency in overall positive terms. At the same time, collective agency sometimes involved compromise among librarians, which could be a source of frustration and sometimes limited individual agency. Participants who framed such compromise among librarians as part of a shared sense of agency still suggested that compromise was overall worthwhile.
5. Managers and supervisors can and often did play an important role in many participants' experiences of having or lacking teacher agency.

Librarian Relations as Fostering and/or Hindering Teacher Agency

Librarian relationships played an important role in many participants' teaching experiences, including in their experiences of teacher agency. Similar to librarian-faculty relations, librarian-librarian relations could foster and/or hinder individual and collective teacher agency. Participants who experienced comradery with and support from library colleagues were likely to view their connections to other librarians as fostering individual and/or collective teacher agency. Though participants were not asked explicitly about their work rela-

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tionships, 31.51 percent of participants described overall supportive relationships within their library communities, which contributed positively to their instructional work. In contrast, 17.81 percent described relationships within their libraries as negatively inflected and as often hindering teacher agency.

Participants' descriptions of librarian interactions often reflected both individual and collective views of agency and suggested ways that individual and collective views of agency can co-exist or can conflict with one another. 19.18 percent of participants described library professional relationships and environments that fostered agency; 10.96 percent described those environments and relationships hindering agency (and did not describe them fostering it); and 6.85 percent described library work environments and relationships that both fostered and hindered teacher agency.

*A Sense of Collec*tivism

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A collective view of teacher agency, expressed partly through use of the term *our*, is evident in the following participant statement: "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. I think that's part community and part-earned (my work over time demonstrating that I can provide effective instruction)." As this participant portrayed their individual work intersecting with the work of a larger community (in this case one of librarians), they also conveyed the importance of trust and support that had developed and been sustained over time.

While the previously quoted participant focused mainly on their individual experience of agency and how it was influenced by a sense of community among library colleagues, some participants placed a stronger focus on agency as shared. Referring to themself and their library colleagues, one individual noted, "we have procedural and systemic agency in our work which obviates the need to try to manufacture a sense of agency where any is lacking." This "systemic agency," shared by a collective *we*, was fostered through structural supports within the participant's work environment. Other participants who described collaborative work and goal setting with library colleagues also often expressed a sense of shared agency, as is discussed further in the descriptions of the next two key findings.

Conditions and Experiences that Influenced a Sense of Teacher Agency

Supportive work environments and work relationships tended to foster a positive sense of teacher agency. Participants who described their relationships and interactions with fellow librarians expressed the value of a sense of mutual support, care, and open communication. Many participants commented on the value of informal interactions and conversations with colleagues as supporting them in their teaching. A similar number of participants pointed to more formalized collaborations as vital to their instructional

work. When participants described experiences of collective agency with fellow instruction librarians, they illustrated that the group worked together toward a common goal. These participants also often suggested that they and their colleagues, as a collective, had greater power to influence institutional culture and to position themselves as equal teaching partners with other educators.

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Informal interactions that contributed to participants' senses of teacher agency included casual conversations and opportunities to reflect and share experiences. Expressing the value of informal interactions, eight participants commented that simply sharing ideas and getting feedback from fellow librarians contributed to their sense of teacher agency. These exchanges appeared to involve a sense of mutual support, care, and open communication. As one participant reflected, they experienced agency through "[the] ability to speak freely to colleagues about my curriculum design and experiences knowing I will likely be met with kindness, and my supervisor's understanding that quantity is not the goal (so I don't have to meet a quota), but rather mental health and quality of instruction matters." Another participant described open conversations as helping them and library colleagues strengthen their teaching practice together: "We also like to brainstorm within our team about instruction so we often have open conversations about how our instruction is going and ways we can improve."

Mutual support, care, open communication, and the shared goal of supporting teaching and learning were also characteristic of more formalized ways that many participants worked collaboratively. Nine individuals indicated that more formalized planning helped them develop skills or teaching materials that they could apply to their individual teaching. This process supported their own sense of teacher agency and often a sense of shared agency. Collaborative work included establishing with colleagues shared policies or practices for library instruction, determining learning outcomes to guide library instruction and programming, and developing instructional materials.

Often participants who described collaboration with fellow librarians implied that they experienced a positive sense of shared agency when they worked with their colleagues on common goals. As one participant wrote, "My team works really well together. We are able to plan and create our own goals for the instruction program, and we decide how we want to work towards them. It feels like I have back up for things I want to try." A sense of support and community appeared central to this individual's positive feelings about their unit's collaborative work.

Challenges Balancing Collective and Individual Teacher Agency

Participants who described collective agency with fellow librarians usually viewed collective agency in overall positive terms. At the same time, collective agency some-

times involved compromise among librarians, which could be a source of frustration and that sometimes limited individual agency. Participants who framed compromise among librarians as part of a shared sense of agency still suggested that compromise was overall worthwhile. However, it should also be noted that, in contrast, three participants expressed having greater (individual) agency because they worked at small institutions where they were the primary or sole instruction librarian. They therefore did not need to collaborate with other librarians.

When participants described their individual teaching as connected to their library unit's shared goals, they often described the need for a balance between individual and shared work and individual and shared goals and approaches. One person described their team's collaborative approach to goal setting. Each year the group chose major initiatives and identified two to three major goals. Initiatives might have an assessment or design goal that this individual was asked to join or lead. While the initiative was collective, the participant explained that "I would have say in developing that goal and typically we [instruction librarians] get some choice in which goals we work on as well." The participant appreciated this approach "because I have some agency but we also get to try big, ambitious things together which is empowering."

Most participants who described supportive work environments suggested that compromises among instruction librarian colleagues were worthwhile because of what was achieved through collaboration. Often these individuals indicated that they and their colleagues considered the goals and needs of both the group and of individuals. For example, one respondent stated, "we develop standardized policies to protect us all." One of these policies appeared to relate to managing faculty expectations about instruction requests. The participant reflected on colleagues' different circumstances: "Even if I'm willing to do a last-minute instruction session, or teach a 3-part session, not every instruction librarian has the time or ability to do that." This participant expressed a similar view about their unit's adoption of standardized learning outcomes for some teaching contexts. They commented, "When we do implement standardized learning outcomes, I know it will be so that we can do assessment of the program as a whole, which is currently impossible without standardized LOs [learning outcomes]."

Another participant similarly noted how a commitment that their group had made to teach certain classes was "a collective choice we made." Because this was a joint decision, "it doesn't feel like a lack of agency." At the same time, this individual noted that some decisions about the instruction unit's commitments had been made before the participant had joined the team. They therefore had not had input about some aspects of the unit's shared work. This additional information raises the question of who is or is not involved in decisions that affect a group and potential differences in how individual group members perceive such decisions. It also suggests that there may be value in a team periodically reviewing certain previously made joint decisions or policies and considering the group's present perspectives on those decisions or policies.

While participants who described making choices collectively usually suggested that doing so was an overall positive experience, other participants noted that shared approaches to teaching and instruction programming sometimes limited librarians' abilities to engage in teaching that felt meaningful to them. Participants who described less supportive work environments and tension among library colleagues were more

likely to experience frustration with collective librarian work. These individuals suggested that collaboration could hinder teacher agency. These challenging experiences frequently involved interpersonal conflict and unequal power dynamics. One librarian who worked jointly with colleagues, but who appeared to have either a minority view or a view that was not openly expressed by most colleagues, described their frustration with both their library's interpersonal dynamics and its position within the larger institution. This individual described an institutional environment in which "the library is not well-received, and I'm told what to teach by non-librarians (pretty much: stick to 'research stuff' and if I deviate away from click here, go there, put words in this box - they repeat the message of stick to research)." The participant related their sense of constraint to not only non-librarians' directives, but also their colleagues' attitudes: "This is probably the most frustrating teaching job I've ever had. My coworkers don't want to change it [...] The history gets in the way - we've always done this or the faculty like this. [...]" This individual suggested that there was little potential for them to independently take a different instructional approach that aligned with their own pedagogical philosophy. They also appeared to have limited voice in what their instruction program's shared approach would be. These sentiments again raise the question of who makes decision and how, whom these decisions affect, and the extent of compromise or flexibility that is feasible when group members' perspectives or preferences differ.

Two participants whose instruction programs took a shared pedagogical approach remarked on the value of those programs having a degree of flexibility that allowed librarians to feel agentic and engaged in their teaching. These individuals had previously felt constrained by highly structured library instruction programs. They were now more satisfied with their instruction teams' work because the groups ultimately chose more flexible approaches. One of these participants described their unit's change from a more structured to a more flexible approach. Previously their instruction unit had "conform[ed] to a more strict list of items we needed to teach." However, "we eventually moved to a less strict way of teaching in that teaching librarians were allowed to discuss what to cover with the instructors / faculty we worked with. It was understood that we would likely all be teaching certain things (the library search tool, keyword development, etc), but we were allowed plenty of leeway in how we would teach it and exactly what we would cover." For this individual, the change supported greater teacher agency.

None of the participants in this study indicated that they preferred tightly structured approaches to library instruction programs. However, this was not necessarily true for some of their colleagues. The previously quoted participant reflected on how their preference for greater flexibility in their teaching differed from the view of a library colleague who "really wanted to see enforcement of a more structured online approach." In contrast, this participant viewed a more flexible approach as supporting librarians' teacher agency. As they stated, "I advocated for more agency for librarians to make those decisions on their own with their faculty (which is our current approach)." This individual saw that flexibility as an important part of their work culture. As they commented, "Typically we try to [have] a 'yes' sort of an environment." These comments and those from the previously quoted participant reflect the reality that colleagues will sometimes disagree on the optimal approach for a group to take. Both workplace culture and interpersonal dynamics are likely to influence participants' experiences of both individual and shared teacher agency.

*The Influential Role of Managers and Super*visors

Managers and supervisors can and often did play an important role in many participants' experiences of having or lacking teacher agency. Several participants described the strong influence that their manager or supervisor had on their experiences of having or lacking teacher agency. Two participants who had occupied supervisory roles also articulated the importance of those in library leadership roles advocating for librarians to be valued as educators and to be supported to enact teacher agency.

Managers and supervisors could be advocates or hindrances for librarians in enacting teacher agency. One individual described their experience of feeling micromanaged by their supervisor and their struggle to advocate for having more choice in how they taught: "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.'" This participant went on to share that fellow librarians, including those whose positions on the organizational chart were lateral to the supervisor, had "fought a similar battle."

Several participants described the strong influence that their manager or supervisor had on their experiences of having or lacking teacher agency.

While managers and supervisors could negatively impact participants' senses of teacher agency, they could also positively influence them. Two participants who either had occupied or still occupied managerial positions described how they advocated in their leadership roles for instruction librarians to be valued as educators and supported to enact teacher agency. These participants engaged in this advocacy partly through their messaging to others in the library and at the institution, and partly through cultivating work environments of mutual support and trust in which librarians could exercise teacher agency individually and collectively. The participant who still had management responsibilities commented on their investment in cultivating a supportive work environment: "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." Part of fostering this environment meant conveying to librarians that "the library has their back if there are complaints about this." The library also had a policy that "requires a few things from faculty and sets some expectations up." This participant noted their good fortune in having organizational support to "develop this culture where librarians can draw upon their own expertise."

For this individual, agency enabled more meaningful collaboration and communication with faculty. They also noted the effectiveness of this approach: "in 99+% of the cases, faculty appreciate what we have to offer, even when we suggest something different than what they initially wanted, and we have developed strong partnerships with our teaching faculty." This individual related their and their team's philosophy and approach explicitly to fostering librarians' senses of agency: "Our overall philosophy that we are partnering with faculty and have our own expertise creates a sense of

agency." The view that librarians' teacher agency has the potential to foster meaningful librarian-faculty collaboration is reflective of many other participants' perspectives on librarian-faculty relations, as was discussed in more detail in this study's second article.[37] In this participant's managerial role, they sought to cultivate a library and institutional culture in which this perspective informed the organization's work on multiple levels.

While this participant described concrete actions that individual librarians can take to foster meaningful librarian-faculty partnerships through which librarians apply their expertise, they also recognized the common challenges that librarians often face when seeking to enact teacher agency. Among these difficulties was the experience of librarians feeling devalued and dehumanized. The participant reflected, "no 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." Although librarians have limited control over whether they have such demoralizing experiences, this librarian noted how support among librarians could help with managing these kinds of frustrations. As they stated, "When that happens, having like-minded colleagues to talk to is helpful."

This reference to "like-minded colleagues" implies a sense of community that may support both individual and collective agency. This library manager and instruction librarian looked to connections and conversations with library colleagues as ways to manage the emotional labor of library instruction and navigating relationships with faculty. In so doing, they suggested that a sense of teacher agency can be fostered collectively. In keeping with a view of teacher agency as shared, they used their leadership role to advocate for fellow librarians and to encourage a collective sense of agency: "In places where I see librarians lacking agency [...], I used my leadership position to pull everyone together to come up with solutions that would better support everyone (as we are doing now)." Their actions were driven by the view that librarians should be recognized "as educators with pedagogical and research expertise [who] have something to contribute beyond point and click database tutorials." This statement described both their view of teacher agency and their professional identity. They continued, "That is teacher agency for me and it ties into my own sense of identity as a librarian, teacher and public servant." The connection that they made between their own teacher identity, and the teacher identity of librarians as a collective, points to the interconnections between the individual and the group, both of which exist and interact within larger structures and environments.

The other participant who described their (former) managerial role had also advocated for librarians' teacher agency in that position. Continuing this advocacy in their current non-managerial position, they saw this work as "a shared value of our department and of the larger library." At the same time, they noted examples in other areas of the library in which agency was more limited and less valued. Differences in how agency was experienced in different part of the library appeared to be a potential source of interdepartmental library friction. As they noted, people in other library units "can view us [instruction librarians] as having too much [agency] and wrongly assume that we aren't being productive or rigorous." However, this participant continued, their instruction unit's "record of impact," research, and campus reputation "tends to support

the way we approach our work." For this individual, advocating for librarians' teacher agency seemed to be more challenging within their library than outside of it, because of conflicting perspectives between those in the instruction unit and those in other units.

For both participants who described their managerial roles, teacher agency was fostered by supportive institutional structures and cultures as well as librarians' understandings of themselves as equal partners with teaching faculty. These two participants' comments are among this study's most collective-oriented descriptions of teacher agency. They suggest that librarian-faculty collaboration did not have to exist in tension with librarians' teacher agency when certain processes were in place and when librarians' expertise was recognized and valued within and beyond the library. Moreover, supportive librarian relationships and supportive workplace cultures could foster a positive sense of individual and collective teacher agency.

These two participants' comments also stand out for their strong messages about the value of advocating for librarians' teacher agency and attending to the role that institutional cultures and structures have on librarians' instructional work. The commonly shared desire among participants for supportive and collegial work environments and relationships, and the fact that many participants did not consistently experience such support, further points to the value of collective and managerial advocacy for librarians' individual and collective teacher agency.

Discussion

Participants' comments frequently illustrated the interconnections between individuals, groups, and their social environments and relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants who described supportive and collegial work environments tended to feel generally positive about their capacity to enact individual and/or shared teacher agency. In contrast, those who felt largely unsupported in their workplaces described more challenges with enacting teacher agency, whether individually or collectively.

Participant experiences of librarian collaborations limiting teacher agency suggests a need for library instruction units to explore ways that shared projects can be 1) grounded in shared goals and values and 2) developed in ways that offer librarians some degree of flexibility in their individual instructional styles and approaches. Instruction teams may benefit from considering a diversity of ways through which individual librarians and the team as a whole can approach shared goals. The balancing of shared goals and unique teaching approaches can better enable librarians to teach in ways that align with their unique pedagogical philosophies and styles. For example, an instruction program might have shared learning outcomes, while librarians have choice in how they approach those learning outcomes.

The balancing of shared goals and unique teaching approaches can better enable librarians to teach in ways that align with their unique pedagogical philosophies and styles.

This study's findings about the influential role of supervisors and managers in participants' experiences of teacher agency support the view that library leadership, management, and supervisors

have a responsibility to advocate for librarians as valued workers within their libraries and at an institutional level. The work of supervisors and managers was particularly notable when participants faced workplace challenges that could potentially limit individual or collective agency (for example, excessive workloads or work expectations, expectations from faculty or library administration that misaligned with librarians' instructional approaches). The two participants who emphasized their own positions as supervisors stressed the importance of advocating for instruction librarians as valued experts and equal teacher partners with faculty. They saw this advocacy as key to fostering librarians' teacher agency. As this suggests, library supervisors can be particularly influential in fostering more supportive and inclusive work cultures among those whom they supervise. At the same time, individual librarians, librarian colleagues, and instruction units can also look to ways that they do, or can further, grow a sense of mutual support and community, through which they foster a mutually supportive work culture in which individuals are recognized and valued as fellow workers with lives and needs in and outside work.

All these findings reaffirm research on the importance of cultivating supportive workplace cultures and working to disrupt professional library cultures that have historically positioned "good" librarians as subservient rather than as valued professionals.[38] While institutional change in higher education tends to be slow, everyday interactions at all levels of an organization have ripple effects, however small or large, and however anticipated or unpredicted.

Limitations

This article has focused on the role of librarian relationships in academic instruction librarians' experiences of teacher agency. However, librarian relationships were not the central focus of the study on which this article centers. Rather, the importance of librarian relationships to the study's focus became apparent through analysis of participants' responses. Because the study's primary focus was academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency more broadly, none of the survey questions explicitly prompted participants to reflect or comment on their relationships or interactions with library colleagues, managers, or administrators. As mentioned in the findings, 45.2 percent of the study participants referenced their relationships with other librarians. A study that explicitly asked about workplace relationships would likely have yielded more robust responses about librarian-librarian relationships.

Given the study's original focus and its design, this article's findings cannot provide a deep view into the many complex dimensions of library workplace relationships. This article's findings do offer a window into the experiences of many, but not all, of the academic instruction librarians who participated in this study. The findings illustrate that, for a large number of the participants, there is a complex and important relationship between librarian relationships and academic instruction librarians' experiences of teacher agency.

Research studies with a central focus on the role of librarian relationships in academic librarians' instructional work could provide deeper insight into this topic and its potential implications. Qualitative interviews would enable more in-depth analysis than is possible from an online survey like the one used in this study.

It should also be noted that there was a lack of diversity among the study participants in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender identity, with the overwhelming percentage of the study participants being white women. Future studies would benefit from a wider diversity of participants. As noted in the literature review, previous research on the disproportionate challenges that academic librarians of color face in the form of micro-aggressions, bullying, and toxic leadership reflects the importance of further research that includes a wider diversity of participants.

Conclusion

This article has explored the important role that library work environments and librarian relationships can play in academic instruction librarians' experiences of teacher agency. Participants often commented on the importance of their relationships and interactions with library colleagues, as well as those with library managers and administration. While most participants focused primarily on their individual teacher agency, many described exercising collective agency with library colleagues. Collective agency, which many described taking time and effort to develop, could be more powerful in initiating positive change at an organizational or institutional level. On one hand, academic library cultures in which instruction librarians often feel undervalued and under supported negatively impact the potential for librarians to enact teacher agency individually or collectively. On the other hand, work cultures in which librarians feel valued and recognized by colleagues and supervisors positively influence a sense of teacher agency.

The specific approaches and actions that librarians and library organizations take to foster individual and collective teacher agency will, of course, depend on their unique contexts. Nonetheless, the experiences of this study's participants illustrate that supportive and inclusive workplaces are key. Librarians and library organizations genuinely committed to fostering individual and collective teacher agency need to examine and challenge commonly held but harmful beliefs and practices in academic (instruction) librarianship that feed toxic work conditions and that sow division rather than worker solidarity (for example, vocational awe, academic work cultures that encourage competition and perfectionism over mutual care). An ecological view of teacher agency, through which individuals and groups consider the many social, structural, and material factors that influence teaching and learning, is vital to cultivating workplaces in which instruction librarians are supported at multiple levels to enact individual and collective agency in ways that foster both student learning and worker well-being.

Unfortunately, many librarians work in departments or institutions in which it may not be feasible or advisable to engage openly in conversations about their workplace culture. Most librarians will likely need to exercise some degree of discernment (and often caution) when deciding where and with whom they discuss workplace cultures and conditions. Nonetheless, conversations and research about 1) workplace culture, dysfunction, and worker well-being and 2) librarians' roles as equal teaching partners, continue to grow. Such work has been a catalyst for more open conversations in the profession about work conditions and professional culture and ways that they can be more supportive and inclusive. This discourse reflects not only challenges for all library workers, it also illustrates positive change that is happening within the profession, even

if only in small pockets. Perhaps even more importantly, this discourse shows a desire and greater potential for growing genuinely more supportive workplace cultures. Ultimately, we need to see more action from higher levels of our institutions' organizational charts, but a single conversation with one colleague can also be a seed that can grow into something that pleasantly surprises us.

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Appendix

Academic Librarians' Conceptions and Experiences of Teacher Agency: Online Survey

Introductory text:
Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments. This study explores librarians' experiences of teacher agency: essentially, the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles. This survey will ask about your experiences of agency in the context of your library instruction work. For the purpose of this survey, library instruction work refers to all encompassed activities, including but not limited to scheduling, designing, delivering, assessing, and coordinating instruction/instruction programs.

Questions:
In what ways do you experience agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to your sense of agency? [multi-line text box]
In what ways do you experience lacking agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to this? [multi-line text box]

Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you experience a greater sense of agency? [multi-line text box]

Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you manage experiences of lacking agency? [multi-line text box]

Does the concept of teacher agency evoke for you certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings? [multi-line text box]

For how many years have you been engaged in library-related instructional work? [multiple-choice]

- less than 2 years
- 2–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16–20 years
- more than 20 years

Do you have teaching experience outside of your library instruction work? If so, please describe the nature of this work and the number of years with which you were involved in it.

- yes

  [If yes, text box will appear.]

- no

What best characterizes the type of library in which you work? (Select one.)

- doctoral-granting research university
- regional comprehensive university
- 4-year undergraduate college
- community or technical college
- military college
- Other (Please specify.) _____

What best describes the classification of your current or most recent library position?

- tenured or tenure-track faculty
- non-tenure track faculty
- Professional staff
- Adjunct
- Other (Please specify.) _____

In what country do you work?

- United States
- Canada
- United Kingdom
- Other (please specify):

_____

What is your age range? (Select one.)

- 18–29 years
- 30–39 years
- 40–49 years
- 50–59 years
- 60+ years

Q18 With which race/ethnicity do you identify? (Select all that apply.)

- African-American or Black
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian American or Asian
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Multiracial
- Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

With which gender do you identify?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Trans or transgender
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

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