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What Am I Doing and Why Am I Here?: Meaning, the Moment, and Combating Burnout

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT AM I READING?

This is a story. It is research on the intersection of burnout, instruction librarianship, and the meaning of work. But at its root, this is a story. To recreate the balance of personal vulnerability and scholarly research from the presentation, I have borrowed techniques from the field of autoethnography to tell this story. Instead of attempting to erase the personal experiences that led to the presentation at hand, autoethnography recognizes the place of the researcher within their research process. It uses the researcher's experience of and relationship to the community they study to support a narrative analysis (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015). While formal and explicit self-reflexivity in library literature is a recent phenomenon (Guzik, 2013; Michels, 2010), informally, librarians have long informally performed self-reflexive practice, most visibly in the LIS blog community (Greenland, 2013). Autoethnography is a qualitative method that is suited to an instruction librarian studying burnout and meaning inside the library classroom because it foregrounds emotional and reflexive personal experience (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015). It leverages the subjective experience of the researcher to add to the complexity of available experiences in the scholarly literature about a subject.

In October 2015, when the LOEX proposal was due, I realized I was feeling burnt out (thanks in part to Maria Accardi's fantastic work on the subject) and began exploring the existential roots of that burnout. I finally read Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning.* I began to think that surely if Viktor Frankl could survive the death of his wife, the loss of his life's work, and a concentration camp, I could survive thirty library sessions a semester. What most stayed with me from his book was Frankl's paraphrase of Nietzsche: "he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" (Frankl, 1946/2006). Frankl noticed that those that had a meaning to their suffering or a purpose to endure were the ones most prepared to survive the concentration camp experience. Frankl's exploration of logotherapy, his psychological study on meaning-making, touched me personally and professionally. I theorized my feelings of burnout corresponded with challenges to my foundational meaning. I had moved from theoretical students and academic structures to real students and academic structures and neither seemed particularly interested in my philosophical approaches to librarianship. I then read Drabinski's article on the *Kairos* of library instruction, which, like the Frankl book, once had sat on a long list of "to-reads." Her argument for presence of mind, flexibility, and openness to the space and time in which I operated (Drabinski, 2014) helped give me a method to construct a personal meaning for my work. This is the story of how I got there.

ON BURNOUT & LIBRARY INSTRUCTION: WHY AM I SO BORED AND ANGRY?

In March 2015, instruction librarian Maria Accardi launched a blog on librarian burnout, where she shared her experiences and those of fellow librarians, mostly in the academic librarian world (Accardi, 2015). By then I had finished a year in my new tenure-track job. That year I taught approximately 60 more library sessions than I had in the preceding year. I was knee-deep in a third semester's teaching season and writing a research poster with the snarkiest title I could dare for ACRL. I was feeling unfocused and bored and just wanted to complete the tasks expected of me. I felt stuck in the increasingly corporatist system of the American university and frustrated with students who didn't seem to care about the critical thinking skills I wanted to help them develop. I wanted to cultivate empathy for students and increase my effectiveness, but I was exhausted and increasingly felt that if my students did not care to put in the effort, then why should I? The guest educator model of library instruction seemed increasingly ineffective

and immutable. When I first read Accardi's blog discussing the connection of neoliberalism, the library instruction model, and burnout I saw all of my emotions expressed in someone else's words (Accardi, 2015).

Burnout syndrome symptoms, as identified by pioneering researcher Maslach (1993), include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of ineffectiveness. Due to the emotional labor involved in working with a client population, service professionals, such as librarians, are particularly prone to burnout (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). For instruction librarians many factors exacerbate a propensity toward burnout: repetitiveness of instruction, negativity or even hostility affect from the service population (students and/or faculty), alienation from the final product of their work, and uncertainty about the meaning and value of instruction work in the first place (Sheesley, 2001). In 1996 Mary Ann Affleck wrote one of the pioneering studies on burnout among instruction librarians in which she further identified a lack of formal education on pedagogy and teaching as a root of stress.

ON EMOTIONAL LABOR, BURNOUT, AND THE LIBRARIAN: WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO BE DOING?

The shape of burnout is not uniform. Often only one or two symptoms will present. However, at the root of a significant amount of the research on burnout is the concept of "emotional labor." First fully explored in Hochschild's 1983 *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, emotional labor is the work performed to regulate the outward display of emotions to correspond to organizational or professional expectations (Julien & Genius, 2009). As public service professionals, librarians are called on to perform emotional labor at the reference desk, in communications with administration and faculty, in one-on-one consultations, and in classroom instruction work (Julien & Genius, 2009; Matteson & Miller, 2012; Matteson & Miller, 2013). Feeling one emotion and expressing another can lead to emotional dissonance—a contradiction between the felt emotions and the emotions expected—which has been correlated with job stress and burnout (Kenworthy, Fay, Frame, & Petree, 2014).

This dissonance was real to me. I understood standing in front of a classroom and feigning excitement while feeling uninterested with teaching the same subject to a similar class. Finding a way to cope with this dissonance was beginning to feel imperative to my sanity and work quality. If the emotional labor caused by emotional dissonance was a core reason for burnout, I needed to figure out how to ease that emotional dissonance. Two methods seemed obvious—either adjust the emotions displayed to match the emotions felt or adjust the emotions felt to match the emotions displayed.

What seemed to be suggested was emotional authenticity—"coherence between [one's] emotion and one's internally justified values and beliefs" (Salmela, 2005, p. 227). This goes beyond simple sincere expression of felt emotion. In fact, looking at teachers, Taxer and Frenzel found no correlation between genuine expressed negative affect and alleviation of burnout (2015). Emotional authenticity, rather, is the matching of affect to both felt emotions and also personal values. Self-concept—including the way that a person perceives their emotional labor—plays a significant role (Matteson & Miller, 2012; Pugh, Groth, & Hennig-Thurau, 2011). In their review of the literature on emotional labor, Matteson and Miller highlight the difference between deep acting—performing emotional labor to modify the felt emotion or perception of a situation—and surface acting—changing the outward display of affect without changing internal felt emotion (2012). Ultimately, they suggested that deep acting has more positive outcomes for an employee and surface acting more negative. Furthermore, autonomy and control over one's own work and work environment correlate to feelings of authenticity and lower experiences of burnout (Matteson & Miller, 2012). This is underlined by the findings that an organizational "climate of authenticity" ameliorates some of the negative expressions of burnout (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012).

ON MEANINGFULNESS AND THE MEANING OF WORK: WHY AM I DOING IT?

An organization can create a "climate of authenticity" and encourage and support autonomy. Indeed, some of the research suggests that organizational changes have a stronger effect on burnout and emotional labor than individual changes (Loonstra, Brouwers, Tomic, 2009). However, personal authenticity is precisely that—personal, and is deeply related to personal authorization and autonomy (Salmela, 2005). Self-determination of goals and personal autonomy are correlated with increased well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As Deci and Ryan (2000) argue, the purpose behind goal pursuits affects how those pursuits satisfy personal needs.

Further, Ashforth and Humphrey explored the role of identity in emotional labor and argued:

> …some effects of emotional labor on the service agent are moderated by identification with the role in question: the greater the identification, the weaker the negative effects on well-being and the stronger the positive effects. We further argue that emotional labor stimulated internal (psychological) and external (organizational) pressures to identify with the role, but that service agents may use various behavioral and cognitive defense mechanisms to ameliorate these pressures. (1993, p. 89)

Two strands of self-concept affect identity's role in mitigating emotional labor effects. Institutional-focused individuals connect to personal identity through meeting and fulfilling standards, whereas impulsive-focused individuals, use "volitional and spontaneous acts" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p. 100) to make the same connection to identity, often in deviation to these standards (Sloan, 2007).

If I wanted to alleviate my burnout, then I needed to improve my motivation. To improve my motivation, I needed to access my identity and understand the values underlying my work in a personally authentic manner. Finding a single meaning for library instruction would not succeed; I needed to craft my meaning from my own goals and values for personal authenticity. In their review of "meaning of work" literature, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzensenski identified seven "mechanisms" for crafting meaning: "authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking" (2010, p. 108). I was gravitating toward authenticity and purpose.

Trained to understand the present in historical context, I first asked why library instruction sessions existed in the first place. I wondered if the move into instruction was a way for librarians to argue for their relevance in the academy in ways that the academy found familiar and comfortable. O'Connor wrote two articles in 2009 about this very feeling, critically analyzing the history of information literacy's formulation as a core job duty. She identifies that "what is needed now are professional documents that offer a consistent theoretical framework from which this existing discourse can be organized and extended" (2009a, p. 88). Further, she claims that reconceptualization of information literacy away from its roots in a standards-based definition could serve to develop a critically astute citizenry. Five years later the Framework for Information Literacy (ACRL, 2016) appears to attempt to solve this problem and fill this void with the goal of updating performance-based standards and increasing flexibility.

Yet, as Beillin notes in his critique of the Framework: "[the document] urges librarians to embrace the Framework yet also resist it, in the tradition of critical librarians who have practiced resistance to the instrumentalization of the library for neoliberal ends" (Beilin, 2015). This is precisely how I was feeling. I need theory to develop my meaning and understand why I am doing my job in the first place. However the Framework felt like another extrinsic meaning provided for me to extend myself to and meet. It was not the intrinsic meaning that I needed for strong motivation. It was clear that meaningfulness was necessary, but similarly clear that I was not to find my own authentic approach to librarianship in either my profession's history or its standards.

ON CRITICAL LIBRARIANSHIP, THE MOMENT, AND *KAIROS:* NOW WHAT CAN I DO?

When I discovered critical librarianship, I finally felt that I had found a place where my internal personal values could be used to help direct my librarianship even when in conflict with those of the larger profession. Teaching students to see themselves as information users and creators in a complicated web of power relations became imperative to me because I saw it as ultimately the most useful approach for my students. From a place of self-care, though, the critical approach was what was best for my emotional well-being as well. It allowed me to access my capability for deep-acting, exercise my autonomy, and focus on the exact needs of my students in my classroom in my institution. It gave me both authenticity and purpose. I do not see librarianship as value-neutral (Elmborg, 2006) and simplifying the power relations inherent in information use and development felt antithetical to my personal values.

Rather than searching for best practices, I found my meaning and my way through too many instruction sessions by placing myself in the political, geographic, emotional moment in which I was teaching. Drabinski refers to this as *Kairos,* a term she borrows from the literature on rhetoric (2014). Operating from the place of *Kairos* is operating outside of truth claims about information literacy and it is it is centering context (Drabinski, 2014). It is pursuing goals tailored to a fungible authenticity tailored to ourselves, our students, and our specific institutions (Nelson, 2016). Such flexibility allows us to model authenticity for our students, who also need meaning and authenticity to aid their learning (Klipfel, 2015). There is no meaning to instruction librarianship. But there is personal meaning to the work I do. Freeing my meaning from standardization provided an emotional authenticity I invoke to ameliorate the negative effects of emotional labor.

CONCLUSION

My personal struggles with emotional labor were rooted in meaningfulness and dissatisfaction with received wisdom of standards and historical expectations in instruction librarianship. Immersing myself in the literature to put a purpose behind my work has helped me to figure out what I need to survive thirty instruction sessions a semester. For me it is not doing my job right. It is having autonomy over my values and the expression of those values in the classroom. We can only do our job well when we are well. As Drabinski offers, "The analytic frame offered by *Kairos* sets aside the question of truth in professional discourse and allows us to ask instead what kind of work is being done when we lay claim to how things ought to be done" (2016, p. 34). That is to say that when we think about current standards or best practices, we are not coming to a positivist truth about library instruction. We are constructing the field and rooting it in the ideology in which we operate.

My answer to burnout has been to still appreciate the wisdom of the field, but to foreground the needs of my students and respect my professional autonomy. I am still not certain that the way the field approaches and executes library instruction as a whole develops our students' information literacy skills in helpful ways. However, I have been able to mitigate burnout by explicitly exploring my personal motivations and values and exploring the reasons why we practice instruction as we do. Meaning-making is a necessary, but intensely personal journey. For individuals who have a strong connection with their work as a purveyor of meaning

in their life and an impulsive rather than institutional self-concept, a *Kairotic* approach may prove a beneficial buffer against burnout as it has for me.

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