Gendered Labor and Library Instruction Coordinators:
The Undervaluing of Feminized Work

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In keeping with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries*, many libraries have a designated "instruction coordinator," an individual responsible for developing pedagogical training, coordinating information literacy (IL) curricular integration and assessment, and training teaching librarians.[1] There is no shortage of guidance in the library literature for these intrepid individuals as they work to create curricular maps, learning outcomes, assessments, communities of practice, and all of the structures that create a well-functioning library instruction program. This paper presents a strong departure from these best practices by shifting the focus away from how to do the work of instruction coordination to analyzing the position of the library instruction coordinator itself using a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework. We propose that despite being an overwhelmingly female profession, academic librarianship is still subject to the same patriarchal structures that underpin contemporary workplaces and organizations. We argue that instruction coordinator job responsibilities are primarily relational activity coded as feminine labor, and that this job role is subject to many of the gendered expectations associated with women. This intersection of workplace structures and gender bias results in the undervaluing of instruction coordinator work, which negatively affects potential career advancement opportunities for women in academic libraries. Through a series of interviews with library instruction coordinators, we begin an exploration of the nature of coordinator work, the value of relational activity in academic libraries, and the role of gender in library leadership.

Something is Not Right

This paper was primarily inspired by our experiences as quasi-official instruction coordinators at our respective libraries. Our day-to-day job responsibilities changed, but our official titles, compensation, teaching loads, and reference librarian duties remained the same. It wasn't long into this shift in job roles that we developed the nagging sense that something was wrong. This was not, as some might criticize, a matter of simple job dissatisfaction or regret at taking on more responsibility, but rather a sense that there was something incompatible between the work that we were tasked to do and the position we now found ourselves in at our libraries. At the same time we were digging into the writings of feminist relational-cultural theorist Judith Jordan, who wrote extensively about the primacy of relationships in women's development, and her colleague Irene Stiver's writings on the impact of gendered expectations of women at work.[2] This led us to Joyce Fletcher, who, inspired by the relational-cultural theorists, demonstrated via ethnographic study that workplaces and organizations are rooted in a masculine bias that not only favors "doing work" in a particular way, but actively excludes or "disappears" more feminized *relational* types of work.[3] Fletcher's work was the clincher: it gave words to the unease we felt,

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and continue to feel, about instruction coordinator work. The problem, we hypothesized, was with the *structure* of the instruction coordinator position and the gendered categorization of that work (not surprisingly, as feminine labor) in academic library environments.

Gender at Work

If, as Barbara Risman writes, "gender is embedded at the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society," then it naturally follows, as many gender scholars have argued, that "the workplace is fundamentally gendered."[4] It is shaped by the same gendered expectations, unconscious biases, and stereotypes of men and women that have created the world in which we live.[5] Social constructions of work are rooted in the private/public sphere dichotomy—women and idealized femininity are associated with domestic or private life, and men and idealized masculinity are associated with life in public or work life. Thus work that is coded as "masculine labor"—described by Fletcher as "congruent with idealized masculinity"—is given greater value and organizational clout than "feminine labor," or work and behaviors more closely associated with women.[6]

In fact, certain behaviors are simply expected of women at work, which reproduce societal inequalities within professional settings despite growing efforts to combat sexism at an institutional level.[7] These expected behaviors and actions are overwhelmingly relational—mentoring, helping, supporting, etc.—and are largely invisible, or, as Fletcher states, "disappeared." They do not read to those in power as "real work."[8] However, this only occurs when these feminine-coded behaviors are performed *by women*. Inquiry into organizational and management citizenship behavior reveals that men—both as employees and managers—are more positively viewed when engaging in both masculine and feminine-coded behaviors at work. Women managers in particular end-up in a lose-lose situation, as researchers have found they are viewed either neutrally or negatively by employees for engaging in stereotypically male or female work behaviors.[9]

"Doing Gender" Within a Feminized Profession

We would hope that in a female-intensive profession like academic librarianship (and librarianship more broadly), these gendered expectations and structures would not exist. Unfortunately the power of patriarchal structures transcends strength in numbers. The same androcentric workplace practices and values are replicated in academic libraries and in academia more broadly. Librarianship is, like social work or nursing, characterized as a feminized profession, and is in large part undervalued because of its characterization as "women's work."[10] In her compelling examination of the affective labor and work of academic librarians, Sloniowski characterizes libraries "as an extension of the domestic sphere," within higher education, where academic librarians function as "shadow labor."[11] We make knowledge production possible within the academy while conducting our own intellectual work and affective labor, both of which are feminized and largely erased within the narrow definition of work in academia.[12] Although Sloniowski doesn't delve into the differences in gender proportions between librarians and college/university faculty, we'd be remiss if we didn't mention the obvious expectations that surround a campus unit staffed primarily by women. What is emphasized is our support role or the idea of librarian as (optimistically) service provider or (cynically) handmaid.[13] Whether this idea of librarians-as-service-providers arose from within the profession or from external perceptions, it is now an ingrained part of librarian identity, with librarians giving of themselves both professionally and emotionally.[14] Not surprisingly, this emotional labor is tied to burnout among librarians—particularly instruction librarians who more frequently interact with non-library faculty.[15] Our role in the academy is decidedly feminized, undervalued, and to many librarians, emotionally exhausting.

Perhaps in response to our undervalued position in higher education, some scholars have argued that librarianship itself is aspiring towards a masculine ideal in an effort to gain greater professional prestige. Roma

Harris states that librarians "have mistakenly concentrated on reshaping their occupation to resemble the traditional male professions," by valuing specializations, skills, and roles that are traditionally classified as masculine.[16] These include library administration and technology-intensive positions (e.g. digital specialists, emerging technology librarians, web developers, programmers, etc.), which are still disproportionately occupied by men.[17] A feminist response to this androcentric focus has been, an "embracing of the feminization of librarianship," or an adoption of a feminist practice of librarianship rooted in empathy, a return to service as an ethic of care, and social responsibility.[18] Accardi's *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* has inspired a new generation of instruction librarians to adopt an open, consensus-building classroom in which personal experience is both valued and incorporated into the learning experience.[19]

Yet despite this push for a feminist practice of librarianship, library leadership and management remains decidedly masculinized.[20] The gender breakdown within librarianship is about 80% women and 20% men, yet the proportion of women in library director positions remains at about 60%. Although this change represents significant gains in a profession that was, until the 1990s, primarily led by men, leadership is still not representative of the gender composition of the profession, nor does it resist the masculine managerial ideal.[21] Leadership in libraries is subject to the same gendered expectations as leadership in other workplaces and organizations, a topic Neigel and Olin and Millet delve into in great detail.[22] When library leadership is synonymous with masculine ideals such as strong, decisive leadership and vision, feminized behaviors like "caring, collaboration," empathy, and consensus-building become "value-laden and do not comfortably align with more rational systems of leadership that embody traits of emotional neutrality"—code for masculinity.[23]

Instruction Coordination as "Women's Work?"

Where then, does this leave instruction coordinators, who, by virtue of their job responsibilities, "must operate… at all levels of the academic organization in order to implement broad-reaching curriculum-integrated information literacy programs?"[24] They are both inward and outward-facing individuals subject to the gendered expectations, biases, and structures both within their libraries and, more broadly, academia. The ACRL's *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators* reveals a strong emphasis on coordinators' supporting role through mentoring and encouraging teaching librarians, helping faculty integrate IL into their courses, and generally doing what is best for colleagues and the program at large. In fact coordinators are specifically characterized as managing programs, but *supporting*—not managing—people.[25] Their ability to effect change is hampered by a lack of authority, as they must educate, cajole, and convince colleagues who they do not supervise to work in the best interest of the library's instruction program.[26] Thus the work of instruction coordinators is likely to be highly relational, which conforms to our own experiences in this job role. This relational work is has traditionally been feminized labor, and occurs in an already feminized sub-field or specialization within academic librarianship: teaching. Based on our review of the literature we would expect instruction coordinator work, by virtue of its feminization, to be undervalued in academic libraries, and set out to investigate this idea in this exploratory study.

Methods

To begin our inquiry into the job roles, responsibilities, and lived experiences of academic library instruction coordinators, we identified an opportunity network of 19 potential coordinators at 17 different colleges and universities in Maryland. One of the issues in identifying instruction coordinators is that many do not have an official "coordinator" title, so substantial communication was needed to establish contact with the appropriate person at each institution. Of the 19 potential coordinators identified, 8 participated in semi-structured inter-

views via Skype. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Coordinators were asked about their official and unofficial job titles, duties, and responsibilities; day-to-day work; challenges and opportunities in their job role; and perceptions of IL and teaching both in and outside of the library. Transcripts were first analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify major themes within participants' responses. Then a second content analysis of the transcripts was conducted using a deductive approach with relational-cultural theory as the overarching theoretical framework.[27] Each transcript was coded for instances of relational activity, which included any indication of an expression of "empathy, mutuality, reciprocity...sensitivity to emotional contexts," empowerment, team building, and support of both people and projects at work.[28]

Findings & Discussion

Coordination is Relational

Relational activity is at the heart of instruction coordination work, and is, in many respects, much harder to quantify than other types of labor. All but one subject emphasized the importance of collaboration and relationship building to the position, both within the library and with non-library faculty. Although collaboration is in many ways an overused library buzzword, in this case it's about more than outreach and marketing. Subjects were constantly aware of the emotional context of different workplace scenarios. One coordinator went into great detail about the need to read colleagues when trying to distribute teaching workloads. "I care deeply that my colleagues feel I am being fair," the subject stated, and continued to describe the complexity of navigating relationships with other teaching librarians when 1) the coordinator is no one's boss, 2) colleagues were reluctant to teach, and 3) the coordinator was a more junior member of the library. All of these factors contributed to a rather tricky interpersonal situation. Three other subjects reported a similar need to "read the room" so to speak, when interacting with other, often senior librarian colleagues, or librarian colleagues who devalued teaching. Again these were individuals the coordinator did not supervise. The phrase "balancing act" was repeatedly mentioned by one subject who admitted to "not wanting to step on people's toes" but also "not wanting to get extra work" in the form of additional teaching-related duties. All of this relational activity is a heavy form of emotional labor, as it requires that an individual manage their own feelings, desire, and wants in order to create the right frame of mind and emotional state in the person with whom they are interacting.[29] In this case, the instruction coordinator must create a sense of buy-in from other teaching librarians for the sake of the IL instruction program.

Within the greater college/university community, the instruction coordinator must be prepared to be, as one subject put it, "the face of all things information literacy on campus." This often means working to support the library's instruction program and the integration of IL into the greater college curriculum. The subjects we interviewed all expressed doing some form of advocacy work for their teaching program and librarians. One respondent describes her efforts to be placed on a number of campus committees and then after serving for a number of years, transferring those responsibilities to other instruction librarians: "I see myself as starting those relationships and then figuring out who fits where for these relationships." Once again this requires a high degree of emotional work in the ability to create opportunities best suited for librarian colleagues, as well as the need to always be "on" or present, plugged into "what's happening on campus" and the life of the college/university.

Of course not all work between instruction coordinators and non-library faculty is positive. Half of the subjects reported feeling discouraged or devalued by individuals or departments who did not view the library as an educational partner. One subject mentioned that some faculty would always use library instruction as "a placeholder" for their class and another brought up that some departments "think we do a good job of supporting their research needs, but I don't know if they necessarily see us as teachers." In another instance, one

coordinator lamented the need to be included in correspondence and events along with other academic program coordinators. No doubt these anecdotes sound familiar to anyone working as an instruction librarian, but this rejection is especially troublesome for instruction coordinators, whose very job depends on fostering the kinds of meaningful relationships necessary for IL integration and education.

All subjects were clear about the need for reciprocity in their role as coordinator. Free exchange of ideas, readings, and opinions were critical to maintaining an active, functioning instruction team. Training and support of people was a major theme in all interviews, and personally important to at least five different subjects, three of whom worked with new professionals. The role of mentor and the work of empowerment featured much more prominently when the coordinator was responsible for individuals new to the field. One subject who also served as a direct supervisor to their teaching team expressed a great deal of empathy and compassion for new librarians in the form of frequent check-ins, an open door policy, and extensive mentoring. This is an all-give and no-take situation, that although ultimately rewarding, takes a great deal more time and effort than supervising established professionals.

Doing the Library "Housework"

As an instruction coordinator, working for the good of a program as well as the people in that program often means doing a tremendous amount of administrative work. Subjects were tasked with administrative tasks like scheduling and assigning classes, administering classrooms, enforcing instruction policy, responding to instructors, and compiling and analyzing statistics. Version of this work was common across all subjects and extremely time consuming. As one subject stated: "I look up at my clock and it's 11am, and what have I done? Nothing." This work is not high on anyone's priority list, but it's needed for the instruction program to run smoothly. In many ways it's equivalent to office "housework": the invisible labor that is done so that others can live and work comfortably and blissfully unaware of the tasks needed to foster that calm environment.[30] In addition to this administrative work at least one instruction coordinator took on additional classes that other colleagues couldn't or didn't want to teach and therefore ended up with the bulk of the teaching responsibilities in addition to coordination responsibilities. Again, this work was unremarked upon by colleagues, and in fact expected by some.

Signals of (Under)Value:
Workload

The workload of instruction coordinators is intense. The majority of the subjects interviewed were responsible for the same reference and instruction duties as their colleagues in addition to their coordinator work. The issue of a heavy or "impossible" workload came up repeatedly, and often the coordinator was doing the same, if not more, amount of teaching as their colleagues. The expectation that the instruction coordinator should take on their fair share of teaching seemed to be ingrained into the culture at some libraries, which seemed to go against the idea of coordinator as program manager. Some relief was available for subjects whose job title indicated that they led a department or unit, as they were able to delegate teaching responsibilities to other instruction librarians, but this was often hampered by librarian turnover or chronic understaffing. One subject expressed frustration at not having the freedom to "think about the big picture" and be "proactive" because of an overload of teaching duties. Planning and creating a meaningful instruction program takes time, but that doesn't seem to factor into the workload distribution for coordinators.

Related to workload is the overwhelming demand of first year instruction and the stress it puts on instruction coordinators who must manage these requests. English composition and first year experience courses were in fact the primary drivers of the need for instruction coordination, and often the most difficult classes to get

colleagues to agree to teach. Programs related to new students, including orientations, resource fairs, and other library outreach, were also delegated to instruction coordinators. In some cases, the predominance of work with introductory-level students also coincided with dismissiveness of instruction coordinator work by subject liaison librarians, many of whom privileged disciplinary knowledge over pedagogical innovation and training.

Role Ambiguity & Troublesome Power Dynamics

Much of the workload issues and occupational stress faced by instruction coordinators in this study appeared to be a result of role ambiguity, a "lack of clear, consistent information regarding rights, duties, and responsibilities of a person's occupation and how they can best be performed."[31] This was directly tied to issues of power both within the library and on the larger campus. Only two of the eight coordinators interviewed directly supervised other instruction librarians yet all were responsible for the health and growth of the instruction program. "I think it's one of the biggest pressure points of this job," one subject stated bluntly. There was much confusion over the power coordinators felt they had to enact change within their library and its instruction program. At least one subject expressed a need for their direct supervisor to "go to bat" for them and another stated that this quasi-supervisory role was "confusing for me so I imagine it's probably confusing for them [the instruction librarians]." This lack of direct supervisory responsibility, in many cases, accompanied incidents of colleagues resisting the programmatic changes that the coordinators attempted to implement. Coordinators are officially supporting and promoting a program, but not overseeing other librarians in that program. One respondent mentioned that this type of problem in the organizational structure "works against the continuity and commitment to instruction that our program should have." Although coordinators provide mentoring and teaching support, they lack the authority and structure that would empower them make substantial change without the intervention and support of a library director or department head.

This is in many ways a missed opportunity for both instruction coordinators and academic librarianship as a profession. There is a strong emphasis in administrative library jobs for managerial experience over leadership experience, which puts instruction coordinators at a distinct disadvantage given that they are no one's supervisor.[32] Should they aim towards upward mobility, what opportunities would they be qualified to take given that they have no official, documented managerial experience? This leaves academic libraries with a whole cadre of librarians who possess a strong knowledge of pedagogy, assessment, and academic culture, as well as the emotional and leadership capacity to foster a collaborative work environment who would not meet a basic job requirement that states "5+ years of supervisory experience." The relational capability that instruction coordinators possess should be an asset to all academic libraries, and instead coordination work does not, based on these interviews, seem to carry that prestige.

Directions for Future Research

This initial round of interviews was very much an exploratory study. We recognize that there are definite limits to the generalizability of our findings based on our interview pool of academic library instruction coordinators in Maryland; however, these initial interviews helped us gather information about the potential iterations of instruction coordinator positions and responsibilities at different types of colleges and universities. In doing so our goal was to begin a conversation about this job that we share, question the nature of gendered roles in academic libraries, particularly in instruction, teaching, and learning positions, and highlight the emotional and relational labor that permeates coordinator work. We plan to expand our research to include interviews with instruction coordinators at academic libraries throughout the United States and Canada, noting the differences in responsibilities between their "official" duties and in their day-to-day work and the value and treatment of these individuals at different institutions.

In this more comprehensive second round of interviews, we'd like to expand our semi-structured interviews to include discussions that explicitly address instruction coordinators' sense of value and recognition in the workplace. In this study we included questions about the perceptions of information literacy (IL) instruction both within and outside the library, but now realize that although coordinator's job identities are heavily tied to information literacy education, factors influencing their professional worth extend beyond IL integration and institutional commitment. What are coordinators' perceptions of their worth to the library and the profession at large? What kind of emotional workplace context does this create for them? Do they feel recognized and valued for their achievements specifically in this position (not as reference or instruction librarians or the other professional identities they possess)? Do they explicitly notice any gendered expectations of them from teaching librarians, supervisors, or faculty outside the library? This line of inquiry could naturally extend to investigating the *external* perceptions of instruction coordinators. Do teaching librarians value the work of instruction coordinators who oversee their programs (and may or may not supervise them as well)? What type of support do directors, deans, and supervisors give to individuals in these coordinator roles and how do they view this position within the larger organizational structure of the academic library? Have they made a conscious decision to empower those coordinators who only supervise programs, or, in the words of one of our subjects, "ideas," not people? These are all questions that would help round out picture of instruction coordinator value in academic libraries.

There is also the potential to further investigate the role of relational activity in instruction coordinator work. We gleaned quite a bit of this information from our subjects' discussions of their day-to-day job roles and tasks, including their interactions with faculty and staff both in and out of the library. However, much can be learned from observing these individuals in their workplace environments. Fletcher's ethnographic study of women at work in a large engineering firm presents a potential model for observational study of instruction coordinators, as does the work of LIS scholars Maria Radford and Mary Cavanagh, who both conducted extensive studies on the nature of reference work through observation of public library reference desks and interviews with librarians.[33] This kind of qualitative research is needed to explore relational labor issues within academic libraries that are only apparent during moments of on-the-job personal interaction. Furthermore, it would be interesting to note how many, if any relational practices make their way into job advertisements and official job descriptions for instruction coordinator positions. A content analysis of these documents, similar to the study conducted by Gold and Grotti would make a useful counterpoint to additional qualitative research.[34]

Conclusion

In this paper we've attempted to examine the library instruction coordinator role through a critical feminist lens, one that recognizes the emotional labor and gendered expectations of this position. We've taken our cue from Sloniowski, who urges all librarians to "write precisely about our labor issues" and "disrupt oppressive divisions of labor."[35] By highlighting the odd, relationally precarious position of instruction coordinators we hope to shift conversations within the LIS literature from how-to's for new IL program coordinators to a more in depth questioning of what this position can and should be in the academic library. Our female-intensive profession is not exempt from gendered frameworks and expectations, and unless we work to actively call out instances of unequal labor practices or valuing of labor, change will remain elusive. This brief examination of just one position within the academic library will, we hope, create a discursive space for future feminist reconstructions of work in the modern academic library.

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