HOW WE SUPPORT TEACHERS:
Mitigating Anxiety and Building Community

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This research explores ways that libraries, in particular administration, can support and help mitigate teaching anxiety experienced by library instructors. The researchers interviewed 15 participants from a survey conducted in an earlier phase of research. Interviewees discussed the critical role of administrators in understanding the complexities and potential stressors of instruction, the importance of building supportive library structures, and the factors that enabled or discouraged them from sharing concerns about teaching anxiety and mental health. Teaching will continue to be a major responsibility for many roles in librarianship. The past few years have brought new focus to the mental wellness of individuals and increased interrogations of work culture, prompting a timely reassessment of how teaching librarians are unique, what we ask of them, and how we can support their mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Much of library instruction is still integrated within discipline-specific academic credit courses, often called “one-shots” (or, sometimes, two or three-shots). The library instructor is entering a room full of students they have never met and have no previous rapport with, and they are teaching with a faculty member who may or may not understand the scope and limitations of their expertise, often with a long list of research-related learning outcomes to accomplish in one or two class sessions. This, and a range of other factors contribute to what can be an anxiety-inducing, and critical, experience as librarians strive to support student learning.

These unique challenges contribute to the pressures and anxieties that many library instructors express experiencing. This paper discusses the second phase of a research project in which the researchers conducted interviews with a subgroup of library instructors who had completed an online survey about librarian teaching anxiety. According to data from our first phase of research, 64.94% of 925 participants reported that they experienced library teaching anxiety. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of those who experience teaching anxiety experience physical symptoms, mostly in the moderate range of intensity (52.16%), while 73.43 percent experience psychological symptoms, with a similarly moderate intensity.

The second phase of this research explores if and how interviewees had developed coping mechanisms for teaching anxiety, supports for library instructors from their libraries, opportunities for teaching development, and ability to discuss concerns among colleagues in the library. The researchers also explored interviewees’ perceptions of administrators’ understanding of the expectations and demands of library instruction. Similar questions were asked of interviewees who were in administrator roles, including exploring leadership roles in developing organized...

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tional structures, in making financial decisions regarding instructional resources and professional development opportunities, and in influencing and responding to library cultures.

Interviewee responses indicated that there is much the profession can do to improve the experiences of library teachers, especially the connection between library administration and the role they have in shaping our organizational structures, namely their ability to affect change for library instructors experiencing teaching anxiety.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

For a review of the small collection of literature investigating causes and instances of library teaching anxiety, please see our paper describing the first phase of our research, *Library Teaching Anxiety: Understanding and Supporting a Persistent Issue in Librarianship.* This literature review also highlights the nascent body of literature exploring mental illness within librarianship. A forthcoming book listed in the 2021 paper, *LIS Interrupted: Intersections of LIS and Library Work* has since been published. Otherwise, the emergence of new, related literature since the publishing of our first phase article is minimal. Koos conducted a review of *Library Teaching Anxiety: Understanding and Supporting a Persistent Issue in Librarianship* and noted that “overall the article was found to be of high quality based on this assessment”. This review gives the researchers further confidence in their results and conclusions, which informed the second phase of research.

In the broader realm of teaching anxiety, a recent systematic review of this literature was published. Notably, it categorized studies by discipline, identifying only one study in libraries, by Kaetrina Davis. Davis's study remains a critical perspective on this topic and served as a foundation for our original survey.

While similar to the scope of our previous literature review, our current study addresses additional themes relating to library organizations, and particularly instruction programs, that foster a space where others can share vulnerabilities about teaching, such as teaching anxiety. In that vein, there is a significant amount of sources discussing communities of practice and teaching development, but with the focus of discussing growth in teaching, not with sharing vulnerabilities or teaching anxiety specifically.

**Methods**

Participants were selected from those who responded yes or maybe to the last question in the initial survey about being willing to participate in an interview. Fifteen survey participants agreed to participate. With approval from our university’s institutional review board (IRB: #11408), interviews were held via Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. The co-researchers divided the 15 interviews between them, being intentional about making sure no researcher interviewed someone with whom they had a personal or professional relationship.

The interviews were semi-structured with 12 questions for non-director teaching librarians and 13 for directors. Directors were defined as people who had power programmatically over library instruction at their institution, which ranged from librarians with titles of Dean, Department Head and Director to Instruction Coordinators. The first three interview questions focused on demographic information. Below is a short summary of institution types, librarian roles, and the liaison structures of the participants.

**Institution Types**

The researchers chose a range of institution size and types from which to invite interview participants, based on publicly available information. Participants then described their institutions during the interview. Several institutions were small, liberal arts institutions with an FTE in the range of 1,500 students, with two being religiously affiliated. Other participants described their institutions as medium-sized or regional comprehensive, with enrollment ranging from 6,000 to 15,000 students. The third group of respondents reported their institutions as large, sometimes Research 1 universities, with 24,000 to 40,000 students.
Library Roles
Interviewees’ roles ranged from library director to liaison librarian. The majority of respondents held roles focused on instruction, including online learning, research support, and public or user services. Several interviewees were current or former library or department heads with some level of instruction involvement. Participants also identified roles as a cataloging librarian and a copyright librarian.

Liaison Structures
Most striking about the question, “How is liaison/teaching work structured at your library?” is the range of roles and structures among the interviewees’ libraries. Teaching is a common component of liaison work, either teaching for specific assigned departments or a college or discipline, and sometimes a mix of colleges and individual departments within one program.

Some liaisons also teach general education classes, in addition to discipline-specific classes. Less common were liaison programs where some liaisons provided outreach and/or collection development to a department but did not teach library instruction classes. Developing relationships and providing outreach are common tasks assigned to liaisons in addition to teaching. Many liaisons at our interviewees’ libraries also do collection development, but this is sometimes assigned to a specific person or department other than the liaison. Regarding structure, some liaison programs involve librarians distributed throughout the library departments, and others have liaisons focused in one department, with a range of structures. Lastly, one interviewee is considered by their library to be a functional specialist who teaches in their specific area but doesn’t provide general information literacy (IL).

Coding Process
Researchers analyzed and applied codes using Nvivo to conduct thematic analysis. They began by coding a sample of the transcripts independently to create a preliminary codebook. The researchers brainstormed potential codes after reading through all 15 transcripts and considering likely codes based on the interview questions. Then, a randomly selected interview was coded together and codes were adjusted as needed, which included combining and restating codes. The next step was to code two more randomly selected transcripts separately and then to reach a consensus together on each applied code. Again, the codes were adjusted as needed. At this point, the two researchers each coded a different interview on their own but read both transcripts and then came together to review. Throughout the coding process, whenever there was a disagreement in coding, a consensus was reached via discussion.

After coding was completed for five (1/3 of the total) interviews the researchers had confidence in their ability to reliably apply the coding with strong agreement. The remaining ten interviews were divided between the two researchers. Once the primary coder had completed the coding process, the alternate researcher applied their codes separately and then compared them to the primary researcher’s code. Once the coding was complete, the data were exported into an analysis document that further broke down the codes into trends, summaries, and representative quotes. This served as the initial groundwork for the drafted findings.

For anonymity and clarity in subsequent sections, each interviewee has been assigned a number. Direct quotations from interviews are attributed to participants according to these numbers.

FINDINGS
Participants discussed a wide range of experiences with teaching anxiety. The researchers identified several significant themes, including the role of administration in developing structures, supports and cultures that mitigate teaching anxiety and the importance of fostering communities that promote sharing vulnerabilities, such as experiences with teaching anxiety. Interviewees also discussed individual coping mechanisms that many library instructors have developed to combat their own teaching anxieties and mentioned a need for stronger teaching development, especially when orienting new librarians to their roles as instructors.
A number of issues that arose in the survey responses from the first phase of the research were mentioned again during the interview phase, including: lack of effective training in teaching during graduate programs, lack of content expertise, discomfort with teaching, lack of a desire to teach, discipline faculty expectations for content and teaching expertise, and a lack of consistency with methods for teaching IL. Participants also commented on additional pressures that had an impact on their anxiety, such as learning to teach to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, a new emphasis on online learning especially in light of a global pandemic, and librarians having an increasing role with promoting inclusion and equity in the classroom.

The Role of Supervisors & Library Administrators

Administration’s Understanding of Teaching

Interviewees described a range of experiences and responses about the role of Administration in teaching and in supporting teaching anxiety, mostly in response to the question: how well do you think your library administration understands the work of teaching and what do you want them to understand about it? A few interviewees were also in a supervisory or management role, in addition to their teaching role. They were asked, what is critical about supporting effective teaching and what does a strong teaching program look like?

Some interviewees talked about how understanding instruction had an impact on priority setting and workload balance. One stated that,

They [Library Administration] just don’t understand how much work goes into it and how much emotion is attached to that work, like how much guilt people are feeling about things not being perfect, or how much they’re struggling with new technology, or the choices they’re having to make… (Interviewee 14).

Multiple interviewees discussed the importance of administration understanding how comprehensive instruction is. One interviewee mentioned the importance of understanding so that they were able to get the resources and positions they needed—she felt her administration was supportive “Based on the fact that they were supportive of and advocated for the instructional design librarian position, I think there's a fairly decent understanding of teaching and what that takes” (Interviewee 14). Another mentioned she wanted there to be more recognition that teaching is a legitimate skill that takes time to train and share with others.

Some interviewees commented that it was difficult to know what administration understood about the work of teaching. They described the importance of trust between supervisors and employees and wanted administration to know that instruction is more than data to report. As one interviewee stated, “I think the best thing about teaching is that you can talk about how it is directly for the students” (Interviewee 1). They also discussed the importance of administration helping to spread messages about the value of IL. This includes supporting teaching and teaching anxiety issues by funding and promoting professional development opportunities and advocating for the importance of librarians in general education committees at the University level.

Multiple interviewees described the benefits of supervisors who taught and/or did liaison work. One librarian felt fortunate to have a dean whose background was IL. Some administrators were more removed from the work of teaching. Another described her director’s supportive, but hands-off approach. One participant described how her director understood and supported online learning, but there was less support and understanding regarding in-person teaching. Others mentioned the importance of instruction policies and guidelines that help instructors manage last minute, or less strategic instruction requests. Efforts like these can help decrease high teaching loads.

Library Structures

Library administration can also build library organizational structures that support strong teaching programs. Researchers asked interviewees if their current organizational structures were ideal to support teaching and if there were things they would change. Interviewees had a range of responses, with some agreeing and some not that their current structures were supportive of library instruction.
Communication and collaboration either within a library or across campuses were mentioned by several interviewees. In an example of an institution lacking collaboration, one interviewee felt their large library wasn’t effective in working across disciplines or areas of the library. “It would be really fantastic if we had librarians who were more interested in teaching across the fields to be more aligned and grouped together” (Interviewee 11). One participant mentioned having to “fight” for spaces that provided teaching-focused opportunities and communication throughout the library, rather than just to a specific group of liaison librarians. With communication issues, one interviewee brought up a lack of communication between staff and faculty, creating silos where staff didn’t understand the teaching that was happening in the library, or the vulnerability of that work.

When librarians approved of the ability of their library’s structures to support instruction, communication was highlighted. One interviewee described a flat structure that worked for their library, but a key element was the involvement of instruction librarians in the reorganization process.

Liaison and Teaching Roles within Departments
Several interviewees brought up the need for structure around teaching roles. Unclear roles can cause challenges, and when roles and responsibilities aren’t clear, this can impact other roles “that probably contribute to how different people feel about teaching” (Interviewee 2).

Other interviewees noted a lack of ability to focus on teaching due to multiple responsibilities. One interviewee described changes underway that were designed to help librarians focus more on instruction by pooling collection development responsibilities with a management group, with the goal to “realign our structure and job responsibilities really to mimic workloads rather than sort of say, everybody’s doing everything” (Interviewee 1). Another interviewee, however, noted that being involved in a wide range of activities was an important element of her job satisfaction and one reason she chose the type of institution where she works. While the structure was ideal for this interviewee, she noted a constraint to growing the instruction program was lack of sufficient staffing in the public services department.

Other participants discussed the problems with asking people to teach when it wasn’t the role they wanted to perform. “Especially when you add in the fact that some of the people who are now liaisons actively don’t want to teach. Sometimes they do it kicking and screaming” (Interviewee 12). Another commented, “Forcing the people to teach when they don’t want to. I think that is key. If someone is hired to be a librarian in an academic institution where that’s the expectation, they need to know that.” (Interviewee 10).

Instruction Coordinator Roles
Participants discussed the need for a position with a focus and expertise on teaching that could help organize and support the instruction program in the library, such as an instruction coordinator position. One participant stated, “I guess I’d just put in a plug for the importance of helping, having a structure and a position of at least one librarian who systemically understands, promotes, and helps with the teaching aspect of our work, and my work as a liaison” (Interviewee 14).

Communities that Support Sharing and Vulnerability
Finding Space for Sharing
Librarians discussed trying to open safe spaces for vulnerable conversations. There were mixed responses about comfort levels with discussing these issues with colleagues and there are a number of factors in whether or not librarians feel safe in these conversations. One librarian included trust, relationships, and personality types: “People, personalities, you just don’t know if you’ll be in a situation where you have a good group of people to work with.” (Interviewee 6).

Some librarians described spaces where they were having these conversations: “I definitely feel like I can talk about it… in the teaching and learning COP (community of practice), there’s definitely space to talk about it. And even the word ‘vulnerability’ has come up there. Some other colleagues, not just me” (Interviewee 13). This
librarian shared the success of the teaching and learning COP, set up as an informal group. Another described having successful conversations in department meetings, “Sometimes we’ll just have a roundtable where the [department] head will be like ‘Let’s all go around and say something we’re working on or something we have a question about,’ and I would feel very comfortable if I was having some kind of anxiety or issue talking about that there” (Interviewee 1). One librarian described trying to create these spaces in their supervisory role. Another pointed out the importance of having broader spaces in the profession: “I always think talking to colleagues is really helpful. I love going to conferences specifically for that” (Interviewee 5).

Librarians spoke of the benefits of being able to share: “It helps to know that you’re not in the boat by yourself with anxiety or any other less than pleasant emotions or sensations” (Participant 12). Others spoke of sharing teaching experiences, including struggles and setbacks but that library teaching anxiety didn’t get expressed explicitly. Another said, “That was really useful, having a community of people that you could draw on who knew what you’re going through, and even if it’s just like, ‘Oh, I sympathize’” (Interviewee 8).

**Barriers to Sharing**

One librarian who supervised others reported barriers to discussing vulnerable issues based on human resource guidelines. Another participant mentioned the stigma associated with sharing as another barrier: “I think a lot of anxiety that may exist isn’t discussed, because it’s one of those things that you’re not supposed to discuss. If you’re a teaching librarian, you’re a teaching librarian and this is just part of your world” (Interviewee 12).

Territoriality issues also impeded collaboration. “I think it encourages people to see their teaching as more like their own independent thing, that they do on their own and to not have as many conversations where you might benefit from seeing different ways people are doing things or seeing that other people are experiencing anxiety as well and sharing better ways of coping” [Interviewee 2]. One interviewee noted that ideally a culture change needs to happen in their library but they don’t feel empowered to make the necessary changes.

Other interviewees discussed a perceived lack of empathy among some colleagues or a lack of closeness within their peer group. Another talked about their evolution in feeling comfortable enough to be vulnerable in these spaces: “I don’t know that I could have said that several years ago maybe just because I felt too insecure to discuss it…But I’ve gotten to know people in my department now personally, and we have pretty good rapport and even friendships outside of work, and so that kind of helps in making people feel more comfortable” (Interviewee 7).

Another librarian shared having space to discuss these issues, but lacking trust in some of her colleagues to do so:

> With some people, it seems safer than with others. I think probably most institutions have it, but we seem to have a certain number of little cliquish things going on. I’m assuming within those cliques it feels safer because those are based on relationships rather than necessarily projects (Interviewee 12).

One interviewee mentioned territoriality and that it’s sometimes easier to talk to people at other libraries in order to avoid the politics at their own. Unsupportive cultures encourage librarians to view teaching as a solitary activity, which reduces opportunities for collaboration and learning or help coping with teaching anxiety.

**Individual Coping Mechanisms**

While individual coping mechanisms were not the focus, interviewees did discuss ways they individually coped with anxiety. Although the results of the initial survey did not indicate that experience as a library instructor translated to less teaching anxiety, multiple interviewees discussed acceptance of anxiety and experience with teaching as two ways of coping. Other common responses to address their teaching anxiety were extensive preparation veering into a tendency to overprepare, quickly building rapport and connection with students, and taking advantage of university support for anxiety. Many interviewees also reported battling perfection in their attempts to deal with teaching anxiety. Interviewees coped with teaching anxiety partly by giving up on continual perfectionism, especially since librarians often are not teaching in their own, or a familiar, classroom.
Teaching Development

Interviewees discussed the importance of strong teaching development, defined broadly as the ways that librarians can be prepared and developed as teachers. One participant described more focus on teaching as the root of the problem (teaching anxiety): “You’re treating the symptoms and not the root of the problem. Okay, so the focus on teaching would help, like that’s the anxiety” (Interviewee 9). While access to mental health care was important to participants in dealing with anxiety, and with teaching anxiety, having strong mentors, as well as effective orientation and continual teaching or professional development emerged as a critical piece of mitigating teaching anxiety.

DISCUSSION

While individual coping mechanisms are important, the authors want to emphasize the role that Library Administration might play in supporting strong teaching programs and healthy instructors. Admittedly, Library Administration has numerous and critical roles with library-wide advocacy, vision, and resource allocation, to name a few. However, these high-level roles are also crucial to supporting instruction programs and the individuals who teach on behalf of the library. While some participants understandably questioned whether their library administration would be the people to whom they would turn to discuss issues of vulnerability in teaching, such as teaching anxiety, there are numerous other ways administration can better support teaching librarians. Their impact on cultures and structures makes Library Administration essential partners in the success of programs, and in the mental health of library instructors.

Understanding and Advocating for IL

A theme that reverberated throughout participants’ responses was a continued emphasis on all the facets of teaching IL, requiring a breadth of skills and effort. They commented on the time and emotional labor of a number of teaching tasks: communicating with faculty, assessing classroom interactions, preparing lessons, and the in-person or online teaching. They commented on the accompanying mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion of these efforts. One participant stated,

I'd like them to understand what it's like to be a teaching librarian. How much time it actually takes to do class prep. Because the impression I get is that, at least for our Dean, he thinks you just walk into the classroom and teach. You don't spend time making slides or figuring out what step in the lesson you're going to do next. Or how tiring it can be, even if you're not anxious to get up in front of a group of students who aren't invested (Interviewee 12).

It is a question worth asking: How many administrators do understand library instruction at this level? And, if they did, how might this inform their approach to supporting programs and individuals?

Increased understanding of library instruction would also impact how administrators are able to advocate for IL initiatives at tables that might be particularly critical to garnering campus-wide support. One interviewee described the value of support coming from the Library Administration, noting the importance of advocacy for IL coming from the top-down. Once value is established, resources like funding and time for IL priorities are more likely to follow.

Building Organizational Structures that Empower Programs and Individuals

Major changes to organizational structures largely rely on administrative backing for progress and implementation. Structures might include library role structures outlined in role statements, they might include committee structures, or hierarchal structures that delineate how instruction roles are supported and assessed.
Role Prioritization and Workloads

Library Administration can play an important role in how instruction responsibilities are prioritized across an organization, or across an individual’s role. One supervisor discussed the importance of helping librarians understand how to balance their time commitments to teaching and the other parts of their work: “I’ve tried to, as their supervisor, treat them with the idea that you should have the time and capacity to do your research, do your teaching, and do your librarianship, which would include collection development and reference and research consultations. If you’re spending too much time on the wrong one, that’s something that you don’t just do more with less, you have to do less with less” (Interviewee 1). Part of the solution for this library involved moving towards a badging approach where materials for various concepts had already prepared online teaching materials that “shift it [the work of teaching] from the preparing lesson plan, teaching synchronously, perhaps assessing it, doing a debrief, you know, all that’s required” (Interviewee 1). Multiple issues interviewees brought up within effective teaching development revolved around workloads and time for effective development, which is an area Library Administration could help mitigate.

Another interviewee discussed needing more administrative support for library instructors, to give more time for their liaison or instruction activities. Areas where potential assistance was needed included record-keeping, statistics, and technical aspects of some positions. An interviewee with a functional role indicated a desire for more cross-training so that one group of liaisons isn’t overloaded with instruction. Also, Library Administration can be a part of breaking down silos that would help functional liaisons be more connected to each other and others in the library, as well as sharing important information.

Instruction Coordinator Positions

Coordinator roles (even in smaller libraries, having some responsibilities, if not the title) emerged as an important structure in building communities that support programs and instructors, and coordinating professional development. Multiple interviewees stated the importance of having a role that includes oversight of instruction. When institutions do have Coordinator of Library Instruction roles, a number of these roles suffer from structural issues. Mainly, they may not include actual oversight of individuals who teach and they are often excluded from tables that would be beneficial to their role, such as at department head meetings.

Prioritizing Time and Space for Instructional Growth and Development

Some participants discussed the difficulty of getting buy-in for opportunities to speak with colleagues about vulnerable teaching issues, like teaching anxiety. One librarian described a Library Instruction Committee that was designed as a way for people to get together and discuss issues of teaching, but they stated, “I think it kind of ebbs and flows on folks’ priority list, and if you don’t get enough people out, it doesn’t feel very valuable” (Interviewee 14). Another participant described a grass roots effort to build a Community of Practice for conversations about teaching anxiety and vulnerabilities, noting that its success was largely dependent on support from Library Administration: “Eventually, it did get sponsored by the administration and supported financially more importantly, by the administration so that’s allowed it to sustain.”

Building Cultures of Trust

Last, administrators can play critical roles in supporting communities and cultures across the library, and within instruction programs and roles, that allow for vulnerabilities and sharing related to issues of teaching anxiety. Some interviewees expressed concern about sharing these issues with their supervisors or their colleagues.

Others noted issues amongst their teaching colleagues related to competition, silos, and territorialism. Reducing competition and shifting understandings of success, and how work is valued in teaching might create stronger spaces for sharing and support. Issues like these are cultural, and often stem from the ways library staff perceive value and success. Administration plays an important role in shaping these perceptions. Their ability to facilitate transparent communication, their acknowledgement of success and acknowledging values, and the way they handle distribution of power and opportunities throughout the organization shapes these perceptions.
CONCLUSION

Teaching anxiety for librarians who provide library instruction is pervasive across academic libraries. This study shows an important role for library administration in developing and maintaining instruction programs which support the needs and mental health of library instructors. Some of the key areas where administrators can have an influence are around the cultures and structures of instruction programs including fostering opportunities to discuss teaching anxiety, mental health issues and other vulnerabilities in teaching. Administration can also impact the apportionment of roles related to library instruction, such as appointing a coordinator of instruction, and clarifying how instruction is prioritized within the library.

This research prompted a range of further research questions that warrant exploration: What do library administrators understand about the myriad issues faced by library instructors and what gaps exist? How might a more full or in-depth understanding of library instruction by administrators mitigate some of the issues raised in this study? How might the ability and willingness of administrators to advocate for library instruction across campus connect to the improved mental health of library instructors? Regarding program structure, what is the impact of programs that don’t include a Coordinator of Instruction, or a similar role predominately focused on library instruction? How does the inclusion or lack of this role influence the mental health of library instructors? Also, are there connections between a librarian struggling with teaching anxiety and student learning? What are the connections between the criteria for “healthy instruction programs” and improved mental health for library instructors?

This study is the first step in identifying mitigation strategies for library teaching anxiety and exploring the role of library administration. This information can be used by libraries with varied sizes and structures and adapted to the organizational structures and cultures of academic libraries in pursuit of stronger instructional programs and better supported librarians.

NOTES