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Amelia Abreu

UX Night School, amelia@abreu.co

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What Collaboration Means to Me: Collaboration and Care

Amelia Abreu (amelia@abreu.co)
Founder, UX Night School; UX Design Consultant

In order to better understand collaboration in professional practice, we should think critically about care: specifically, the work of caring and the dynamics of care at work.

What do we mean by “care,” exactly? Care is encompassed in the acts of assistance, support, maintenance, and attention. Care seems to span a wide range of human activity: the practical terms, contexts, and iterations of it can vary widely. Disciplines and professional fields ranging from philosophy to medicine to zoology each have their own working definitions of the term. One can care for a collection of rare books, but differently than one can care for an elderly library patron, one’s pet, one’s child, or oneself.

Care is a central feature of humanity: humans require more care as infants than any other species. It’s currently estimated that 70 percent of adults will need long-term care. Care is also central to our economy: care is increasingly sought outside of informal family or community structures, and thus “caregiver” is set to be the largest occupation in the United States by 2020. Care, and the necessity and value in caring for others is the topic of almost every religious text.

I argue, care is inherently collaborative, and professional collaborations almost always require reciprocal expressions of care. By examining these themes, we can more thoughtfully and equitably engage in collaborative work, both within librarianship and beyond.

As I also explore further, care is often political. As of this writing, the conditions of who will be cared for, and under what circumstances, is being debated in the Legislative Branch of the

United States government, while the Judicial Branch hears cases pertinent to provision of women’s health care.

For librarians, our professional ethics are steeped in care. According to the ALA Code of Ethics, we are to provide the “highest level of service to all library users,” to enact “equitable service policies” and provide access to resources in an “accurate, unbiased, and courteous” manner.

Most crucially, we are bound by our ethics to protect and respect privacy and intellectual freedom. This itself is a form of caring for users, and one that could be construed as activist resistance. Expressions of this sort of care are often everyday acts of social justice.

Background: Caring and Collaboration

My interest in this topic can be explained through my own professional background. I began my career as a librarian and archivist in academic libraries. Then, in 2007, I re-enrolled in graduate school to study Human-Computer Interaction, with the intention of designing better technology tools for libraries. My dissertation research centered on collecting and collaboration via the Internet. As a graduate student, I took on side jobs doing user research in the tech industry, and eventually transitioned to full-time work as a User Experience specialist. I now work as a consultant in the technology industry, and enjoy the opportunities my work gives me to glimpse into many different organizations and institutions, as well as a broad range of collaborative dynamics.



Since the birth of my daughter five years ago, I've redirected my scholarly perspective to better understanding the concept of care, both in regard to my professional interests and with wider social issues. Thus, over the past year, I have been working on a book project looking at the intersection of care and technology.

Gender features heavily in our ideas of care: care, as is commonly said, is the work of women, and librarianship, along with professions such as nursing and teaching, are characterized as "caring professions."¹

What Is the Work of Care?

Care seems to figure into all work, both by coordinating human effort, making efforts possible, and maintaining what has been previously accomplished or produced. Feminist artists, such as Mierle Laderman, who authored the "Manifesto for Maintenance Art"² have explored the work of maintenance, such as garbage collection and street sweeping. Other feminist technology scholars, such as Deb Chachra, have explored maintenance in contrast with that of production, or in newer terms, "making." Care work is akin to maintenance work, if not identical.

What does this mean for librarianship? Many aspects of librarianship can be framed as maintenance work, including cataloging and metadata, collection development and management, preservation, and programming. A library is not simply a collection of material, but a human organization that supports and gives access to that collection through dedicated services. The relationship between care and maintenance is somehow ever-changing for librarians.

Thus, it seems fairly logical to frame collaborative librarianship in terms of care and care work. But what do we mean by care? The most satisfactory definition I could devise, after much searching, is "attending to the needs of others, oneself, the culture, or the environment."

Sociologists often define care in three types: instrumental, emotional and informational.³

Instrumental care: We can witness instrumental care work are the day-to-day tasks: bathing, cleaning, grooming or preparing food - in librarianship, we can see this in attention to operations and environments in which libraries exist.

Emotional care is characterized by listening, paying attention, advising, or validating - reference interviews or meetings with community members can be characterized as such.

Informational care is applying knowledge or best practices for the benefit of the intended care recipient: this can be cooking a meal for a friend with diabetes, or adapting an environment to accommodate different abilities such as making sure adaptive technology is readily available, information instructional sessions meet a variety of learning styles, and/or resources meet basic ADA requirements.

Conclusion: Collaborating and Taking Care

In conclusion, there are two main arguments to present. The first is that care is, in nature, collaborative - as the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated, one cannot care for what one does not acknowledge, and this can have massive political and social implications.⁴

It is also almost always necessary to collaborate when caring for someone else, and often necessary to collaborate with others in caregiving. Nurses maintain charts and shift records for continuity of care⁵; as I have described in relation to care for my own daughter, transferring care to someone else often requires nuanced communication about the care recipient's physical health, dietary needs, sleep and other activities, as well as other data points related to well-being.⁶

The second argument is that collaboration, especially across disciplines, institutions, and other

structures of power, can be facilitated and developed by care. Moreover, communicating across disciplines often has implications for caring outcomes. Nursing scholars and scholars in business and management have termed this “Knowledge Translation”:

Knowledge-translation interventions attempt to increase evidence-based practice by a single professional group and thus may fail to take into account barriers from difficulties in interprofessional relations ... Interprofessional education and collaboration interventions aim to improve interprofessional relations, which may in turn facilitate the work of knowledge translation and thus evidence-based practice.⁷

In short, both in theory and in practice, disciplines and professions have to work at instrumental, emotional, and informational care in order to work together.

Lastly, collaboration is often an act of care in itself. We often collaborate with others out of a desire to express care, and we often caretake with our collaborators: holding them accountable, managing projects, and working in ways that take into consideration their own disciplinary practices and values. We often come together in collaboration as a way to make our own caring more effective, for our students, faculty, users, and patrons.

Understanding collaboration, and the “taking care” one must do in librarianship is crucial to understanding our enduring impact, enriching both our profession and the institutions within which we work.

¹ Shirazi, R. (2014, July 15). "Reproducing the academy: Librarians and the question of service in the digital humanities." *Roxanne Shirazi*. Retrieved from <http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/>.

² Laderman Ukeles, M. (1969). *Maintenance art manifesto*. Retrieved from http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf

³ Drentea, P. (2007). Caregiving. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Blackwell Reference Online. Retrieved from <http://www.blackwellreference.com>.

⁴ Sontag, S. (1989). *AIDS and its metaphors*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

⁵ Bowker, G. C., Timmermans, S., & Star, S. L. (1996). Infrastructure and organizational transformation: Classifying nurses' work. In W. J. Orlikowski, G. Walsham, M. R. Jones, & J. I. Degross (Eds.), *Information technology and changes in organizational work* (pp. 344-370). New York: Springer.

⁶ Abreu, A. (2017). *Care, labor and design: An intersectional approach to computer supported collaborative work*. Paper presented at the workshop “Imagining Intersectional Futures: Feminist approaches in CSCW,” at the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, Portland, OR.

⁷ Zwarenstein, M. & Reeves, S. (2006). Knowledge translation and interprofessional collaboration: Where the rubber of evidence-based care hits the road of teamwork. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 26(1): 46-54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/chp.50>

