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What Collaboration Means to Me

Partnership in Praxis

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Abstract

This column offers a reflective and theoretical perspective on the potential of collaboration to function as a tool to resist replicating dynamics of oppression and inequity, and as a strategy to challenge negative aspects of institutional climates and culture in library work.

Keywords: collaboration, librarianship, praxis

I began working in libraries at the same time I started my academic career in women, gender, and sexuality studies. This is a field of activist-scholarship informed and driven by its connection to community, dedication to analysis, and values of equity and justice. Because of this, my understanding and experience of librarianship and feminism grow together and continue to affect each other. Over time, I have worked to clarify a sense of my praxis – that is, how I enact the principles that inform my feminism through the work I do as a library staff person. Through reflection, and especially through the practice of writing, it is increasingly clear to me that collaboration – and how, at its best, it can function in libraries – is an integral and defining element of the praxis I want my work to embody and bring into being. This column is an effort to share elements of that reflection, how partnership and collaborative thinking continue to impact the sense of satisfaction, ethics, and pride I have in my work. As someone with an explicitly feminist praxis, I aim to introduce the potential of collaboration to function as one tool to resist replicating dynamics of oppression and inequity, as well as a strategy to propel us toward a re(vision) of the kinds of spaces we would like

to work in. As a caveat, I use the term “librarianship” to refer to the labor and passion all of us contribute to this profession and field of scholarship, regardless of position, title, or credentials. As you read, I invite you to consider collaboration in broad and experiential ways, imagining how alliances across departments and institutions, between libraries and community organizations, and amongst faculty, staff, students, and volunteers might function in your own work.

As we know, libraries are inherently collaborative spaces. We act not only as stewards of our collections, but of the very processes and experiences of research and learning we engage in with patrons and with each other. As our contemporary discourse and reputation suggest, libraries are also sites of liberatory potential, as values central to librarianship – of freedom of information, equitable access, and community support – render our work essential to democracy and therefore dangerous to hegemony. At the same time, we sit with the knowledge that any radical potential of libraries is troubled by the fact that their uncertain survival hinges on the funding, support, and facilities of larger institutions, be they universities, municipalities, or



companies with budgets and political priorities that can serve to bolster or hinder the impacts we have in our communities. The tasks of information professionals are the constant navigation of the implications and tensions of these relationships and their manifestation in our work and workplaces.

As someone invested in critical notions and methods of teaching and learning, my relationship to the environment and labor of my librarianship is one that I often consider. As a feminist, it is imperative that I continue to work to identify, understand, and revise inequitable dynamics of power in my life. When we critically consider the social positionality of librarianship, we assess how equity, access, and social justice are and are not evident in the work we conduct through our larger institutions, and their even larger respective social contexts. I believe that if we are going to have the kind of radical presence and impact that we aspire to have in our communities, we must carefully and consciously act to ensure that our work is carried out in ethical and equitable ways, and that we evaluate the methods and means by which information is evaluated, collected, preserved, shared, remembered, and analyzed in our role as stewards of both resources and experiences. Engaged in this notion of libraries as integral social sites of learning and unlearning, I believe that collaboration is a key component of our success as well as our liberatory potential.

In my experience, there can be challenges to feeling connected to and sustainably inspired by any hopeful or generous understanding of librarianship alone, especially if we find ourselves physically or conceptually distanced from the more tangible outcomes of the services we provide. For those of us working indirectly or inconsistently with patrons, it can be difficult at times to easily conceptualize and feel confident that our work too is essential to any larger social mission. In the library tradition of under-funded

resources, we are prone to internal issues of siloing, competition, and stagnation. Exacerbated by attitudes of inefficiency, there are distractions and obstacles to developing and maintaining meaningful connections within and beyond our workplaces, as well as to preserving positive, sustaining relationships with our work itself. These institutional conditions, along with issues of inequity and injustice that we identify, all call for and locate collaboration as an integral ingredient of both morale and resistance in our work.

In this conversation, I feel that it is important to distinguish conscious collaboration from more generalized shared labor. To me, true collaboration is characterized by its intention as well as the ways it embodies and is marked by values of community, in particular: accountability, reciprocity, and affinity. When aspects and outcomes of our work are developed and framed collaboratively, hierarchical authority is, in many ways, replaced with shared agency and responsibility. When we provide opportunities to practice accountability to ourselves and our colleagues, by its very definition collaboration serves to interrupt and ease challenges to doing our work well and equitably. In climates of isolation and competition for limited resources, collaborative thinking reframes our labor as cumulative, and locates our outcomes as shared. In my own work, new relationships and responsibilities resulting from collaborative projects with faculty and students help me to be much better able to trace and understand the impact of my contributions within larger goals of service and learning, and therefore effectively renew the stakes I have in my daily tasks. In working in community with my colleagues, patrons, and members of other organizations, collaborating consciously and ethically is an exercise in itself of navigating those tensions of thinking, working, teaching, and learning within the auspices of the social paradigms and institutions we each operate from. While it may seem simple, collaborative efforts across difference can result in

deeper and more visible reciprocal partnerships between departments, and can in turn improve the support and reference we provide as our communities of knowledge and resources are expanded.

There is great value in unraveling the experiential elements of our work as we challenge ourselves to engage our librarianship with our activism, to consider what this work can mean as well as accomplish as we move through the world. I invite you to consider the ways in which your sense of yourself as a library worker inform and shape your praxis, and what values make up your praxis and contribute to your own vision of libraries as sites and avenues of learning and social change. For me, collaboration is a core way that I am able to ensure that my work not only aligns, but also, embodies my values. It proves beneficial and essential to interrupting and replacing negative attitudes and aspects of my work. I continue to be surprised and motivated by the lasting and powerful impact collaboration continues to have in my life.

