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## Joy is a Strategy: How We Sparkle Together

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### Keywords

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*From the Field*

## Joy is a Strategy: How We Sparkle Together

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### Abstract

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### Introduction

These notes from the field outline the authors' efforts to pivot from traditions that hold us back by refusing isolation, rejecting seriousness, and taking risks. Instead of hiding our sparkle behind the facade of academic seriousness, we embrace the power of a sequined accessory to shine light on the vibrant, gratifying, and impactful work of libraries. In our reflection on collaboration, we offer a femme leadership perspective that seeks to reshape libraries as places where individuals are celebrated for contributing to collective wins, where empathy and inclusivity are practiced, and where people are drawn to psychologically safe spaces to be creative and productive. As frequent collaborators, we have

discovered that purposeful collaboration can combat feelings of isolation and the deployment of joy as a strategy can shape our future in new ways.

Our work together includes leading a redesign and reframing of the Northeast Research Libraries (NERL) consortium. NERL is a licensing consortium in the United States and the members of its Program Council are the licensing experts, experienced negotiators, and savvy collection development leaders of some of the most prestigious research universities in the country. The Executive Committee, an elected body of the Program Council, advises the NERL Director, reviews new publisher offers and provides governance for the licensing program. NERL is rich



in the resource of talent. Its community-based structure is especially conducive to collaborative efforts, providing ample opportunities for creativity and experimentation. The examples in this article come from the authors' experiences on the Program Council Executive Committee.

### **Rejecting Invisibility**

The historically invisible labor of librarians, especially those managing electronic resources, was pushed into the spotlight during the work-and learn-from-home years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Licensing new electronic resources and renegotiating multi-year contracts to accommodate sudden budget cuts, quickly became one of the most important jobs in the library during the pandemic. This was a moment for those managing e-resource licensing to shine. It was also a moment of incredible loneliness. At our own institutions, and at NERL, we grappled with staffing shortages and uncertain budgets. We also struggled with the paradox of being suddenly valued for work we've always done, while still bearing the burden of doing more with less.

The pandemic magnified problems of scarcity and insufficiency that have plagued academic libraries for years. We've seen how limited resources can lead to paralysis in decision making and engender or reinforce a spirit of competition between staff. We've felt how negativity about unrewarded obligations can block our ability to find long-term solutions. As newly elected NERL leaders, we wanted to reject the loneliness of our jobs where we were the only ones who knew how to complete certain tasks, such as negotiating a license agreement. We wanted to intentionally seek out community experiences where our labor is not only visible but celebrated.

Collaborating in consortia environments can be an antidote to the feelings of overwhelm and in-

visibility librarians may feel at their own institutions. NERL provides members with a venue for sharing workflows and processes that save us time. We negotiate together for pricing and services that benefit us all instead of competing with vendors for the best individual deals. NERL also gives members the opportunity to serve one another as informal management coaches and thought partners, and it is a place to share the load of mentoring and nurturing each other's early career staff. Infused with the energy of a new leadership team, it was easy for us to see how NERL could be a place where joyful collaboration could flourish.

### **Community is the Opposite of Isolation**

The first task we undertook was to move away from the top-down annual negotiation and renewal process that had become a NERL tradition over the years. Instead, we implemented a new structure that distributed work across multiple volunteer teams. The new negotiating teams were intentionally designed to include subject matter experts not only in license review and negotiation, but in data analysis, project management, and outreach. Our desire was to foster creativity by making space for multiple perspectives. We wanted NERL teams to be places where individuals could contribute meaningfully, while also learning from others and building skills. Roles-based teams had the effect of distributing work in a way that was beneficial for the group and rewarding for the individual. Not only did this process achieve better deals at a faster pace, but the team members benefited from learning from seasoned colleagues in an environment that was purposefully flat and egalitarian in structure. New friendships and professional collaborations were born.

Creating community culture involves taking time to see one another and offer recognition. For us this meant turning an agenda of boring monthly updates into a plan for community



sharing where input was requested, and actionable feedback was received. The agenda allowed time for welcoming new members and getting to know them as people as well as librarians representing their institution. We celebrated negotiation wins with song lyrics and memes. We praised one another with encouraging Zoom chat messages and emojis. We did this because we know images and pop culture poems are as important as words in recognizing the humanity that we bring to our work. Together we celebrated new jobs and promotions and strategized and offered support during difficult hours. Through these experiences, we know that we often are not alone in solving problems, even ones at our local institutions.

In this time of revitalization of NERL, we intentionally sought community by choosing to see each other's efforts and investing in one another's success. Seeing one another meant giving acknowledgement when a publisher meeting went badly but a team member said something brave. It meant writing a response to someone's email to compliment the way they communicated a difficult message. It meant calling a colleague after a meeting to tell them their leadership style was especially effective that day. And it meant pointing out the abundance of volunteer talent by contacting NERL member Deans at the end of the year to recognize the specific ways in which their staff supported critical negotiation outcomes. This step in the process we found to be the most important: often the work of acquisitions or licensing staff is largely invisible if it is going well. Consortia work is at its root about the collective, and often the contributions of individuals can be obscured. We learned that by taking the time to recognize individual volunteer labor, joy was magnified, and NERL members were encouraged to keep volunteering in subsequent negotiation years.

The result of several years of concentrated grassroots consensus building was not only a vibrant sense of community, but also new types of deals.

As we chose new ways of recognizing work and showing up for one another, publishers and library administrators also noticed there was something different about NERL. We were asked about the "secret sauce" that made the Program Council suddenly effective, and publisher representatives wondered how the consortium could so quickly transform into a values-based advocacy collective.

Our answer is that we were operating in a creative and trusted environment where we felt safe taking some calculated risks.

### Taking Risks

Academia is notoriously risk averse. Staff at universities are incentivized to protect their status and brand. Institutions regularly compete with one another for prestige and funding. When we are insular and protectionist, we miss the opportunity to be forward-focused and to embrace the uncertainty of the future. Rejecting the isolationist tradition is vital for ensuring a sustainable ecosystem of scholarly communication.

By employing the heavily relational structure we mentioned above, NERL member participants were better equipped to engage in blue-sky thinking and risk taking, demanding better deals and suggesting models to publisher partners that had not yet been tested in the market.<sup>1</sup> In the past, the consortium was often led by publisher offers predicated on the status quo. By heavily relying on structures present in project management schemas including stakeholder mapping, role codification and clarity, clear timelines and deliverables, plans for communicating widely about our successes and of course, celebrating a project's completion, we were able to achieve not only better deals, but better group working relationships.

In consortia negotiations, not everyone gets what they want out of the deal that is struck. But with structured communication and project-



managed negotiation teams, NERL members understood what was gained or given up for a particular deal. We could act in solidarity and celebrate wins that were not necessarily our own, because there was mutual understanding of group benefits. Evidence of progress toward goals was not always immediately apparent, but we celebrated even the small wins because each step away from tradition and toward new ways of working together feels important. We invited our publisher and vendor partners to agree to meeting, project, and yes, celebration, norms as well. Some remark that they have more enjoyment using this model as well as consistently achieving more interesting models and deals.<sup>2</sup>

Celebrations are both a representation of our commitment to joy as well as another avenue for creating joy. As a strategy for improving work environments, celebrating together is a management skill that can easily be taken back to our individual institutions.

### **Joy is a Strategy**

We often receive questions from other consortia or individual librarians who want to understand and therefore replicate the success that we've found in collaborations together. In particular, we were profoundly influenced by comments from Eileen Joy, director of punctum books. Dr. Joy's framing of our approach, where affect matters first and foremost, alerted us to the work of affect theorists in the domains of cultural and feminist theory.

It is the affect of a group that not only encourages and predicts success, but how individuals feel about the work, project, and indeed their collaborators themselves that affectual theory would find just as important as the work itself. Feeling differently can open up space for "thinking, acting, and knowing differently," which can challenge existing structures.<sup>3</sup>

The notion that feelings about our work and our relationships with each other have equal if not

greater importance than the work itself struck us as an alternative to the stoic tradition of academia. Librarianship can feel like it is often stuck in two affectual "poles," careening from toxic positivity and vocational awe to despair and negativity.<sup>4</sup> Collaborating joyfully with a group that is not in competition with one another is where personal and professional fulfillment, as well as excellent work outputs, can be found.

Our group is committed to creating joy and doing so has become our strategy for effecting organizational change in the consortium we represent as well as in our own institutions. Operationalizing joy has meant fostering structured consensus-based decision-making, predicated on significant communication, which in turn requires a foundation of trust. For us, achieving high degrees of trust has meant being truthful by not only saying the quiet parts aloud, but also the happy parts. We've learned that the best way to quickly achieve trust and develop a spirit of play and joy, is to encourage group members to openly share their feelings, whether silly or serious. We've found that when a group trusts each other and operates as a caring community, individuals are more willing to be creative and take rewarding risks.

### **Sparkle Together**

Although two members of our group of four have recently left NERL member institutions and therefore no longer collaborate with us and the wider consortium formally, we found profound personal and professional fulfillment in continuing to be a community of collaborators together. We actively pursue joy by coordinating sequined outfits at conference events, quoting Beyonce in presentations, and holding monthly "sparkle" meetings to share in our professional successes and sorrows. In our work at our own institutions, we continue to highlight the individual contributors on the projects we manage,

mark the end of crucial projects such as ILS migrations or fiscal close periods, or celebrate a new hire by transitioning the work of a search committee into thoughtful and intentional onboarding for the new staff member.

The types of meaningful affectual collaborations we have experienced are unfortunately rare in our profession. Creating a structure for thought partnership helps us imagine workplaces that

could truly be built on mutuality, trust, safety, and risk taking. We invite readers to create similar structures for formal and informal collaboration. It was through our experiences of reimagining what consortia work could be that we reimagined what we could ultimately be to each other. The pursuit of joy as a strategy for impactful librarianship allows us all to sparkle, thrive, and transform our profession together.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Stamison, "NERL Issues a Statement Demanding a Better Deal," news release. March 3, 2021. <https://nerl.org/2021/03/03/nerl-issues-a-statement-demanding-a-better-deal/>.

<sup>2</sup> Brett Goldfine, Erik Limpitlaw, Lanette Garza, Sarah Gulliford. "Transforming a Renewal Agreement into an Equitable Licensing Deal." *Common Place*. Podcast audio. October 30, 2023. <https://commonplace.knowledgefutures.org/pub/rbqo2i8u/release/1>.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Åhäll. "Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion." *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2018): 36–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olx024>.

<sup>4</sup> Fobazi Ettarh. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." *In the Library with a Lead Pipe* (January 10, 2018). <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.