THE ERASED LABOR OF DIGITAL LIBRARIES

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INTRODUCTION

Though this talk was a different presentation 2 months ago, it is still an un-presentation centered on ethics. I have rewritten it many times, & have grieved for the impossible tasks ahead. One disclaimer: I am a huge fan of, and proponent of, ensuring MLIS and MIS students and paraprofessionals gain professional footing with good part-time jobs and internships. I believe this needs to be done ethically.

While I was initially going to share successes in good labor practice that we’ve managed at UofSC, I want to do so while pushing forward with a conversation on ethics in labor practice at digital libraries, pre-, current, and post-pandemic.

“During this pandemic and in the aftermath, ethics may become highly inconvenient”.
–Arwen Spinosa, MLIS
“The work of a digital librarian bears all the signifiers of carework typified by the broader [overtly feminized] profession of librarianship”

–Kate Dohe, Care, Code, and Digital Libraries: Embracing Critical Practice in Digital Library Communities,

In the Library with Lead Pipe

Additions in brackets are my own.
Actual Work & People Unseen…..

Working on specialized equipment requires a great deal of training and patience, and usually comes with higher wages. This is often not so in digital library shops. By not paying a higher wage, individuals and groups become less ‘visible’ and therefore, the work they actually perform, less important (optically). (Milgrom & Oster’s 1985 invisibility hypothesis).

Creating good quality digital collections requires training in and use of complex data parsing applications, proprietary & peculiar content management systems, and a broad working knowledge of best practices. Again, these are white collar skillsets, and they’re being required from technicians who make blue collar wages.

And, it’s no surprise in the historically feminized workplace that is libraries, broadly speaking, the individuals asked to make these financial sacrifices to achieve actualized, but subsequently erased, labor, are frequently minorities. (Dohe, “Care, Code, and Digital Libraries”, In the Library with a Lead Pipe.)
Most part-time employees are not physically seen by the majority of the Library’s faculty and/or staff. Secured entrances or separate work areas create a psychological barrier. We have started, with much success, inviting our student and paraprofessional part-time and full-time staff to large UofSC Libraries meetings, even recommending them for teams where they can gain experience and truly feel valued.

If statistics are not kept on how much gets produced and by whom, it is so much more difficult to ask admin for raises, permanent staff, departmental funding, etc. UofSC keeps and loudly (professionally) communicates our immense productivity, with contextualized stats and annual reports. Stats are a great way to keep from getting ‘erased’!
Managers play a crucial role in helping their staff weather this storm. One of the best things a director can do right now is lead from a perspective of ‘whole person’ management—recognize that people are at their limits right now and don’t assign them mindless busywork or give them even more uncertainty to panic about. If staff are having days where they need to take care of family matters, mental health, whatever—just let them have those days.” – Jensen, “Librarians Under Pandemic Duress: Layoffs, Napkin Masks, and Fear of Retaliation” Book Riot

- What are we expecting of our part-time staff during this pandemic? Are we planning on ‘maintaining’ large levels of productivity? Are we downshifting to accommodate for our humanity?
- Are we prepared for a possible uptick in demand for digital resources during the newest wave of online teaching?
- Have we expressed the intense need to salvage departmental funding for temp and student staff?
ERASED: FINANCIAL LABOR
PAY RATES & PROMISES

In our industry, we frequently pay lower wages, predominantly to minority groups, and occasionally promise that if they stay, something will come of it and the position will develop. Whether or not this happens is nearly impossible to divine. Because of these promises, though, “the cumulative financial impact of these temporary or term-limited positions includes the costs of moving often- rent and broken leases, long commutes, distance from support structures, and living apart from [family and/or] partners, as well as little progress towards paying off student loans, low, or no retirement savings, and salaries which remain flat even as inflation lowers their value”. –Tillman and Rodriguez, “Digital labor forum tackles temp jobs on grant, digitization projects”. Library Journal.

- $10 an hour, 10 hours a week was where we started, at UofSC, for the majority of hires. Slowly that climbed to 20 hours a week. Pay rates didn’t increase until requested in 2018, to $12.50 an hour. This request was made to accommodate the detailed skillsets of recent MLIS grads, and also gave those who had been working at the shop for more than a year, an opportunity to be rewarded for their dedication and hard work, keeping the shop humming.

- If budgets in digital libraries are slashed, does this return to unpaid volunteer work, like it did during the 2008-2012 recession?

- Should we just be grateful? Comparatively, in countries in Africa and Asia, the going rate for some digital work (in and outside of librarianship) can be anywhere from $4-$8 an hour for part time or full time work. [Graham, M. (2017). “Digital labour and development impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods”. Transfer 23(2).]
“You may not agree with me, but the main reason for any library science student to work a low-paying, part-time job is to hopefully use that experience to get a higher-paying, professional job down the road. As someone who has had a number of jobs in the profession, and someone that feels some major guilt that we pay our student employees less than most retail and food service establishments would, I do a lot to try to help our students find real jobs.” –Steve Duckworth, “Maximizing the Student Work Experience”, https://archivesteve.wordpress.com

- What can we do to mitigate the low pay level? Dial back on creating SO much and hire fewer staff for higher wages?
- The buzz phrase ‘acceptable loss’ is making the rounds in higher ed. How can we keep our employees in the face of this rhetoric?
- Do you feel the low pay, which severely and adversely affects an individual’s ability to support themselves (or others) is justified, just to get them experience? If so, why?
ERASED: EMOTIONAL LABOR
EMOTIONAL [& LINGUISTIC] LABOR

Because “digital collections librarians [are] handmaidens to a vision of libraries that poorly emulates the commercial IT industry”, they are often tasked with the emotional, and frequently linguistic, labor of “explain[ing] technical concepts, or how decisions are made by software developers”. –Kate Dohe, Care, Code, and Digital Libraries: Embracing Critical Practice in Digital Library Communities, In the Library with Lead Pipe. Additions in brackets are my own.

▪ This codeswitching is a *daily joy*, which involves constant carework, ensuring our online users, our colleagues, and our industry, understands what we’re doing and why.

▪ We’re asking our part-time and full-time paraprofessionals to do this, too. To understand, translate, and contribute on the same level as full-time, higher paid benefited digital librarians. While the professional experience may be beneficial, the emotional on-the-job labor expected is disproportionately unbalanced.

▪ Are we being paid the same as web developers? Then why are we translating for them?
In a survey sent out last year, 61.8% of respondents from the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Israel said that libraries, archives, and museum contract work (like part-time and full time temp appointments) negatively impacted their physical and mental health. 94.7% of all survey respondents were women; 44.8% of all respondents were under the age of 35. Nearly 80% of those surveyed said they felt unsupported, with no access to resources. [https://collectionsoncontract.com/2020/02/20/unsupported-uninsured-unsustainable-the-effect-of-contracting-on-young-professionals/](https://collectionsoncontract.com/2020/02/20/unsupported-uninsured-unsustainable-the-effect-of-contracting-on-young-professionals/)

- How many of those are in our digital shops and departments?
- What can we actionably do to change even some of this?
- Why does the veil of erasure fall upon young women, in an industry that is filled with women in positions of relative power (department heads, directors, associate deans, chancellors, provosts)?
“The Special Libraries Association (SLA) has issued dire warnings about the impact of laying off information professionals during the pandemic. “Cutting library and information professionals during economic downturns has proven to have negative consequences and is increasingly short-sighted in a global marketplace that is becoming more interconnected with each passing day,” said SLA President Tara Murray, https://bookriot.com/2020/04/24/librarians-under-pandemic-duress/
If we let the ethics of labor practice slip because we lose funding, staff, the will to carry on.... We are letting our profession slip, too. Digital preservation is nothing without human preservation.

▪ What happens post-pandemic, when a lot of our budgets shrink and our workload remains the same?
▪ Do we ever re-gain financial footing? When can we expect to bounce back?
▪ Do we want to work at institutions where we and others are valued? If yes, ....
▪ Can we use this pandemic to radically restructure our labor practices in digital libraries?
Knowledge gap: I don’t know how deeply or broadly my experience is and whether or not it is replicated across the digital services, digital collections, digital libraries industry. That’s where you come in!

If you are part of a shop or department that produces a digital product of any kind, in libraries, archives, and museums, and you have a named/titled position, please consider filling out this survey. It will take 5-10 minutes, tops.

Unlike previous surveys, this survey solely focuses on non-grant positions and non-term limited contract positions. The majority of the survey is situated from the perspective of supervisors and managers of recurring temp staff and student positions. Results will be anonymized.

SURVEY:
https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=GUsgSzXRDkKLsrHNI4mYzJUM_6JCwK5NmMChmcqpd1UQkpERlhVQUtEMURaVIZSTTIONzhNNjE3RS4u
LABOR PRACTICE RESOURCES!

DLF Labor Working Group: https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/dlf-labor-working-group


COVID 19 Emergency Resources: https://toolkit.dobetterlabor.com/covid-resources/

Contract work & students: https://collectionsoncontract.com/2020/02/20/unsupported-uninsured-unsustainable-the-effect-of-contracting-on-young-professionals/

Steve Duckworth’s tips for maximizing the student experience:
REFERENCES


REFERENCES


THANK YOU.

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Digital Libraries Labor survey:

https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=GUsqSzXRDKLsrHNI4mYzJUM_6JcwK5Nm

MChmcpqpd1UQkpERlhVQUtEMURaV1ZST1ONzhNNjE3RS4u