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*crossroads:* explorations in librarianship & student affairs

## The Future of Teaching Librarianship: A Keynote for MILEX 2018

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*The following is a condensed transcript of a keynote for the Maryland Instruction Librarians Exchange Spring 2018 Meeting in Columbia, MD delivered on April 11, 2018. The theme of the conference was the, "Future of Teaching Librarianship." Slides with notes are [available here](#).*

### Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning. I am excited to be speaking with you about the future of teaching librarianship and to spend the afternoon exploring teaching

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reflect on what we are doing well and what can be improved. So I am grateful for opportunities like these, when we are able to share and learn from another.

When I first learned the theme of today's conference, the future of teaching librarianship, I was immediately overwhelmed. At that moment, the future felt not only enormous, but also very far away from my day to day practice.

A few years ago, my partner and I went through premarital counseling. Although you might not know it to look at me, I am a professional level worrier. No one can snowball faster from a sore muscle to an undiscovered autoimmune disorder faster than me. So, day one of counseling, we show up, introduce ourselves, and I immediately go to this dark place of, what if, in the future, our marriage falls apart? Because our counselor was patient, kind, and professionally trained for these kind of questions, she gave me the advice I needed to hear, which was, "the future comes one day at a time." By which she meant, you wake up and you put one foot in front of the other, and day by day, you do the work of being present, compassionate, and putting each other first, and when you fail to reach that potential, of extending grace to yourself, your partner, or sometimes both. Maybe you can't control the future, but if you do the work willingly and with an open-heart, you have a shot of getting there, one day at a time.

When I heard the word future, and felt my body tense up, I took a step back and I reminded myself, that this future, while it may be vast and complex, will only come one day at a time. And when you think about it like that it's not so big. It's just us, having conversations like these, about who we are, and who we might, one day, want to be. As much as the future of teaching librarianship is about the collective, I hope to convince you that it is also about the lived experiences of each of us who teach; be that at a research library, or a community college, or on the other end of an online space, with students that you will never meet. While the future might feel far away from my day to day practice, or yours, it is the enactment of this practice that moves us forward.

The theme of my talk today will be the relationship between the micro and macro; the ways in which our collective future is informed, or perhaps even constrained, by our individual, very micro experiences. I don't know about you, but I know amazing teachers who use technology, and amazing teachers who do not. I know teachers who work in flexible spaces, computer labs, and at reference desks. I do not believe that our future lies in the space between these differences; between what we teach, or how, or where we stand. Instead, I believe our future will be about who we are and the context in which we work. And for me, this comes down to two things:

- Identity, or how we see and understand ourselves, both as individuals, but also as profession
- Image, which includes how we name and describe our work, but also how we model professional practice for those around us

## Identity

I'd like to start with a conversation about identity. In research, you'll often see a positionality statement; which is the idea that a researcher's position, or relationship, with a topic or a community is impacted by their social identities, values, and experiences. As professionals, we bring a positionality to our work, and as teachers, we also bring it into our teaching practice. Your positionality is your story - it is why you care, why you strive, and

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dependability of these two things. But it always starts with a story.

### *Professional Identity*

In August 2017, I started my PhD in Student Affairs, which explores issues of student success, social justice, leadership, and co-curricular support for higher education. One of the things that I have loved about entering this new discipline has been the focus on identity development. This is not something that we talk a lot about in libraries, although we actively support students through their development process. It is also not something that we talk about as a profession: how we are socialized and learn what it means to be a librarian; the values that we carry forward; the things that while they may be unspoken, or unrecognized, nevertheless inform who we are not only as a profession, but also, as individuals within this profession.

If you do a search for “professional identity” in library literature, you will find a small amount of research exploring our identity as librarians, but you will find almost nothing about how we develop that identity; about how our belief in what-our-profession-stands-for shapes who we are as practitioners; how our social identities may impact this larger professional identity; or how our individual identities may shift or change as we continue within the profession. Instead, identity it is viewed as a static concept. We either have it, or we do not. We are librarians, or we are not.

If you were to dig a little further into the identity of academic librarians (whom, I would argue, have a unique set of values, expectations, and customs) you are likely to encounter research on professional image, which examines how individuals outside of our discipline view our profession. This research engages directly with issues of perception, or how we are understood and valued by those outside of our community; whether we are respected as equals in the academy, or viewed as outsiders; whether we are faculty, or staff, and how that designation may impact the perception of our work. But the prevailing theme among this research, both for academic librarians, but also the profession at large, is a relentless fixation on the external.

Before we can answer the macro question that we are facing today - of who we will become and what the future of teaching librarianship might be - I think we have to start at the most basic, micro level. We have to start with asserting that our story as a profession, and our stories as professionals, have value.

So today, I'd like to start by sharing my story with you. I am going to tell you about four parts of my identity - teacher, mentor, manager, and student, and how each of these continues to develop and change based on my context.

### *Teacher*

I was born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, which I will always claim as my home. The South is a complicated place, but it gave me some of the best things in my life - football, a love of front porches, my husband, and y'all - a underrated gender-neutral second person plural pronoun. Although I have lived outside of Tennessee for nearly seven years, I still try and order sweet tea at restaurants (which never works) and offer my fellow travelers the behind the head hand-wave when someone lets me into a lane in traffic, which, to this day, has been reciprocated exactly twice. I am less from the South than it is a part of me; it informs how I move through the world, what I bring to a space, how I interact with those

Being the Tennessean I am, I attended the University of Tennessee for both my undergraduate and graduate degrees, and spent the summer between these programs applying assistantships. I was an art history major, who liked art and history. My destiny was, therefore, to be an archivist. Three weeks before school began, right when I had given up hope on ever finding an assistantship, I interviewed for a GA position in the User Instruction department of Hodges Library. I had no desire to teach, but I had a strong desire to have a job that would also pay my tuition. Not to overstate things, but that job changed my life. It gave me an opportunity to teach, and it doing so, set the course for the rest of my career.

The first time that I taught a library instruction session, I was terrified. I couldn't sleep the night before, and remember my hands shaking as I tried to write my name on the board. It took time, but eventually, I realized that was good at teaching. I wasn't the best teacher, I am still not the best teacher, but I was good at making students feel cared for, which at its core, is what I believe teaching is all about. I learned that there are whole entire jobs in libraries dedicated to teaching, and while teaching can be exhausting, at its best, it is a liberatory practice that allows students to be seen and teachers to be heard. To quote bell hooks, whose scholarship I read for the first time during graduate school, I learned that education is the practice of freedom.

In 2012, I graduated with my MLIS and moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to work as Learning Design Librarian at Millersville University. Millersville is a medium sized public university about two hours north of DC, which you, like me, had probably never heard of before today. I loved Lancaster, where I lived, which is a thriving urban city surrounded by cornfields and blue skies. Lancaster county is known for two things: being headquarters of Auntie Anne's pretzels and serving as home to the second largest population of Amish in the nation. My time in Lancaster was punctuated in equal parts by ironic donut shops, vegan pop-up restaurants, and lazy drives through the countryside, where I sat in my car, on an empty road, waiting for a herd of cows to cross to the other side.

Although I loved my university, colleagues, students, and library, something about Pennsylvania never felt right. It could have been that my partner lived four hours away, or it could have been that I had been that I had grown up on a land-grant university, in the shade of brick buildings and on long green lawns, where students lay on the first warm day of spring, and Millersville, while it was a generous and patient place that allowed me to grow, was never supposed to be the place that I stayed.

My two years at Millersville were some of the most important years. I learned that being a teacher was more than standing in front of a classroom. It was curriculum design, assessment, learning objects, and space management. And none of it was work that could be done alone. It was at Millersville that I grew comfortable with the term librarian and started to view myself as a professional, rather than a student. It was also there that I learned how to be an academic; what meetings could, and could not, be skipped, how to use the wield the word problematic like a weapon of passive aggression, and how to close my emails with the signature of academics everywhere, "all the best." It was at Millersville where I learned to be an insider.

Two years later, I moved to DC, a lot wiser, a little more weary. I had been hired as Teaching and Learning Librarian at University of Maryland, which was five times bigger than my previous institution. I remember being amazed when I relocated to the DC-area that there was not one, but two Targets within ten minutes of my home. Although I had been raised in

teaching unit, which is where I believe I am meant to be. I like being surrounded by strong, smart people, who love students and want to change the world. In my experience, these people are drawn to teaching, and in particular, teaching units.

### *Manager*

Two sudden departures, a budget crunch, and a hiring freeze later, I was promoted to my current position as head of my unit. If it was Tennessee that gave me teaching and Millersville that gave me clarity, it was Maryland that gave me the gift of management. I had no experience in administration, but I had a lot of experience in teaching, which I learned are not that far apart. I found that I was not the best manager, but I was good at caring for people, which is what I believe leadership is all about. It took me a while, but eventually, I realized that supervision, is less about prediction and control, and more about creating space for people to grow and doing the hard work of stepping back so they can shine. It is about being an advocate and a cheerleader and willingly and joyfully volunteering to stand out front; so when the shit hits the fan, as it inevitably does, it hits you first. If teaching helped me to find my purpose, it was leadership that gave meaning to that work.

Becoming a manager also meant stepping back from the work that had defined me up until that point. I started teaching less and emailing more. I found out that there is a direct correlation between the number of people you supervise and the number of meetings on your schedule, which no one warns you about ahead of time. No one tells you about how development includes not only growth, but also loss. About how, in order to make space for new things, you have to leave others that you love behind.

### *Mentor*

About a year into my time at Maryland, my dear friend Alex and I pitched a teacher training program for MLIS students, called the Research and Teaching Fellowship. For some reason, my Assistant Dean, to whom I will ever be grateful, gave two junior librarians with less than five years experience between them, the time and resources to build a Fellowship program.

I learned quickly that mentorship, while it has elements of both teaching and management, is a special relationship that is co-created between people. If it was teaching that taught me to care, mentorship broke open my heart and enabled me to serve in ways I had not known I was missing. I learned that being a mentor is less about knowing all the answers and more about having an open-door, an empty seat, and a box of kleenex. Now, when I talk to people about mentorship, kleenex are the first thing I mention. You only have to be in the position of handing a lightly sobbing graduate student a Chipotle napkin once to realize that mentorship necessarily requires a certain infrastructure investment.

Mentorship is more flexible than management and more forgiving than teaching, but perhaps more than anything else I have done in my life, mentorship is about joy. I learned that when it is done right, well, and with a generous heart, mentorship is about giving people the confidence to believe in themselves and providing a soft place to land when things don't go the way we planned. It is about the joy of helping someone find their passion and live up to their potential. I found that like teaching and management, that, at its heart, mentorship is about caring about people; which is something that I am good at.

### *Ethic of Care*

of care. For me, caring is what it means to be a librarian. I show up, every day, and I care. Some days, that caring is hard, but other days, it is the profound joy of watching students become librarians and those librarians become leaders. Or the small quiet joy of helping a first year student chose the brave path forward and not select legalizing marijuana as their paper topic. But it was teaching that taught me how to care and caring that is at the heart of who I am as a professional and who I believe we are as profession.

Somewhere, along the way, my positionality changed. Day by day, step by step, I had moved from teaching forty or fifty sessions a semester, to teaching none. As someone who identifies as a teacher, this realization was difficult. I started to question what it meant to be to be a teacher. What was it about teaching that was important? Was it being in a classroom? Was it the learning process? Was it the smell of expo markers in the morning? Each person has to answer this for themselves, but, for me, I realized my teaching is about connections. I started to see that although my teaching looked different than it had when I started, I was still a teacher; I just spent now my days doing teaching observations and watching practice presentations for job talks. In 2017, I started adjuncting in the MLIS program at UMD, which opened me up to another kind of teaching. And again, my positionality shifted.

### *Student*

Today, I am still a teacher, but I am also a graduate student in my Ph.D. program. I have found that being a student has made me more compassionate, purposeful, patient, and understanding, in every aspect of my work - from how I supervise, to how I show up and participate in meetings. Rather than cutting me off, each new aspect of my identity has allowed other parts of me to grow; although, not always in the ways that I expect.

As much as my identity has been shaped by experience, I also have to acknowledge the ways in which I am bound by my perspectives. As a White woman, I have the privilege of seeing myself reflected in the world around me, including my profession, which, according to the latest ALA demographic study, is that is 86% White and 81% Female. That impacts not only my world view, but also, what I bring into a teaching, management, and mentorship space. As a first generation college student, I know, first hand, that higher education is more accessible to those with social and cultural capital to spend, and that knowledge impacts how view, understand, and interact with higher education. I am daughter, a friend, and an unabashed Taylor Swift fan. When I walk into a classroom, or a room, such as this, my identity is shaped by aspects of my identity that you can see, like my race and gender, but also these experiences you cannot touch; how I came to be with you today, my values, assumptions, and my privileges. In the same way that my professional identity is tied to my story, our identity as a profession is tied to who we are as librarians, teachers, and teaching librarians. We cannot talk about the future without first talking about who we are, and how we came to be here.

[At this point in the keynote, we did a 15 minute identity development activity. Worksheet is [available here.](#)]

At its core, teaching is relational. It is about the give and take of the learning process, and the sharing of that experience in a communal space, be that physical, or electronic. The teachers I have learned the most from have been the ones who have allowed me to know them as whole persons. As librarians, we do not often have this luxury. When you operate in a system in which you interact with students in one hour increments once, or perhaps twice, over the

seen, and heard, and have our experiences counted. The single-session format is terrible, I think we can all agree on that, but we cannot allow this limitation that has been placed on us by the academy to shape our identity; we are more than the sessions in which we teach and more capable than the platforms we have been given.

I believe our future is one of authenticity, in which our perceived worth matches the quality of our work. But the only way that we get there is to stop talking about our limitations, and start talking about our capabilities, experiences, identities, and potential.

## Image

I believe the future of librarianship, and in particular, teaching librarianship, will rest in how we name and describe our work. When I was approached with the theme of today's event, after moving through my anxiety around identity, the second thing that I thought to myself was, "isn't the future of teaching librarianship... just teaching?" Why do we need the "librarianship" tied to it? Or, in other words, why are we so hesitant to own our identity as teachers, and claim our work on the same scale, level, and complexity as our academic colleagues?

When I brought this question up with a friend, she asked me, *how do you explain your professional role to people outside of your discipline?* I will admit, I was caught off guard. I realized that when asked this question, I almost always respond, "I am a librarian at the University of Maryland." To me, this says "I am a librarian, but not the kind you think of when you hear the word librarian." I do the same thing when I meet new faculty members on campus. If a topic such as research leave or professional service comes up, I will almost always say, "librarians at Maryland are *considered* faculty." I do not say we *are* faculty, which we absolutely are, or that we have the same rights, responsibilities, and privileges as any other faculty member on campus, which we do. I say we are considered faculty.

It is that little distance between how I perceive my work and how I describe it to others that has been bothering me. I've been thinking a lot about why I describe my experience in this way; about what is holding me back from saying aloud, what I voice constantly to myself. That our work may look different than what you think of, when you think of librarian, or teacher, or faculty member, if that identity applies to you, but it does not change the fact we are all of these things, simultaneously.

I believe that we gravitate to the term "teaching librarian" because it foregrounds teaching in a way that "being a librarian who teaches" does not. The first time I thought about this, I will admit that approached it from a deficit perspective. I thought about how I identify my work as teaching and myself as a teacher, and yet, how I fail to claim this identity to those outside my community. I began to question if the reason we call ourselves teaching librarians, rather than teachers, might be the same reason that I tell people that librarians are considered faculty, rather, than that we are. I wondered, if what sat at the heart of that phrase, was not that a desire to efficiently describe the work that we do, but instead, an indication that we felt undeserving; that because our teaching, librarianship, or faculty work does not look like what you think of, when you think of a teacher, or a librarian, or a faculty, that in some way, that makes us less worthy of being those things.

But then, being the developmentally focused student-affairs infused professional that I am, I stepped back and recognized how much power there is in that phrase, *teaching librarian*. For

teaching mentor, or a teaching faculty? For so long, the term teaching faculty has been used to divide librarians from our academic counterparts. But are we not also faculty who teach? Are we not also, managers and mentors, students and colleagues, coordinators and instructional designers who teach? And so, maybe, when I say I am a teaching librarian, it is not because I do not feel comfortable adopting the mantle of teaching, but is instead, a recognition of the complexity of my identity; an acknowledgment, that teaching librarianship cannot be put into a box. Because librarians, perhaps more than any other staff position on campus, are never one thing. We are always librarians and teachers, supervisors and learners, reference librarians and collection managers. And I believe this complexity is our power.

At the same time, we have to be cautious of the ways in which this multiplicity can be weaponized against the worker. When you hold so many different identities and do so many different types of work, it can start to overwhelm you. As teachers, we see this in the tension between our visible and invisible labor. We see the work that we do in the classroom, we count the number of students and faculty and sessions, and we report these to our administrators and professional organizations. And these numbers have power. But these numbers do not count the amount of time we spend preparing; not only building lesson plans, but also learning how to be good teachers. Attending things like this conference today, to talk about what we do. The numbers do not count the amount of time we spend watching youtube videos on how to fix a projector, scheduling sessions in the outlook calendar, or standing in the stairwell, eating a granola bar because we scheduled four back to back 75 minute sessions and did not have time for lunch.

I know that librarians across the spectrum do complicated and meaningful work and that their labor is undoubtedly undervalued and under-compensated. But I am going to make a bold claim and say that teaching librarians are some of the are the hardest working, most talented, and least celebrated members of the academy. As much as I believe that it is teaching that gives us power, I believe we have to acknowledge the complicated system in which we exist. There is something problematic about the fact that we view teaching as an entry level experience; that we give the responsibility of student learning to the least trained and least experienced among us; that we routinely hire instruction librarians who have enormous teaching loads and limited institutional support, knowing these positions, by their very design, are unsustainable. This is not, in any way, intended as an indictment of new teachers or entry level librarians - I have been one of those librarians, I hire those librarians, I teach them and train them, and believe they are our future. But I think we cannot have this conversation without also acknowledging the complicates system in which we work.

This is also not a reality that is exclusive to libraries. If you look at who does the work in the academy, who carries the burden of teaching, and in particular, of teaching first year students, you will find adjunct instructors, contingent faculty, graduate students, and less commonly, new faculty members. First year students are our most vulnerable population, the ones who are the most hungry for knowledge and needing of support. *But anyone can teach, right?*

I don't want to dwell on this, but I do want to acknowledge that our individual experiences are a part of a larger system. We cannot talk about the future without also talking about the present; about how our micro informs the macro. And as teaching librarians, we can use our positionality to perpetuate this system, or disrupt. We can choose to conform, or we can choose to resist.



I believe the future of teaching librarianship *is* one of resistance. In which, we push back against the minimizing of our experiences and the undervaluing of our work based on the number of sessions, or students, or users. I believe our future is one of empowerment, in which we become the narrators of our story. But the future, as we know, only comes one day at a time. So how do we do this? How - when we are working within a system of scarcity, in which we are constantly being asked to justify our existence and prove our worth - how do we resist?

When you work in a system in which your value is tied to things you produce, **resting can be a form of resistance**. You know who you are as a teacher and you know that you are not your best self when you teach four sessions in a row. In that moment, you can choose to conform - and sometimes, that is a choice we have to make - but you could also make a different choice, to prioritize yourself and honor your labor by saying, "No. I cannot teach those sessions on one day. Why don't we split these visits over two class periods." And that no is a form of resistance. It sounds easy, but if you have been in that situation, you know no can be one of the hardest words for a librarian, especially a teaching librarian, to voice.

These decisions we make about our work impact not only our experiences, but those around us. As librarians, we are so often operating within a narrative of resilience and grit that tells us that we should be doing more and more, with less and less. But as teaching librarians, we have the power to disrupt by asserting that our work is deserving of time and attention and that we, as professionals, are deserving of the space to grow.

As a manager, a mentor, and a teacher, and a colleague, this is something that I take seriously. My practice sets the tone for those around me and helps to inform the expectations that we place on new teachers. And so, I resist. I take breaks, even when I am busy. I turn off my email when I am home. I say no to the last minute request for an instruction session because I know I will not have time to prepare. And I believe that day by day, step by step, these micro moments of resistance will slowly, but surely, change the system. Sometimes, it is the smallest steps that can be the most radical.

How many of you have gone through an entire work day, looked back, and thought to yourself - *what have I even accomplished?* When you are estranged from your work, frantic, and overburdened, you do not cannot create space in your day for joy. As teachers, so much of our work is focused outwards, on our colleagues and students, that we lose sight of our own experiences. We forget to ask if we are challenging ourselves? If our work is bringing us meaning? We fall into routines, because our schedules and our workloads do not allow for creativity. In these moments, I believe that **joy is one of our strongest forms of resistance**. Because joy is something that we do only for ourselves.

I believe our future is letting go of things that are absorbing our energy and robbing us of our creativity. We can start this in big ways, like cutting back on our teaching loads, or small ways, like taking five or ten minutes out of our days to write, or read something that pushes us to think about things in a new way. These decisions to prioritize your well-being are acts of resistance, and sometimes it helps to think of them as such. I am not here to tell you that coloring for five minutes is going to change the world, but I am here to say that if you believe that teaching is not valued in the academy, as I do, one way that we can start change this mindset is by treating our teaching as something that is important, and treating, yourself, as a teacher, as someone important. It is a small step, to assert that you deserve five or ten

I believe that the future of teaching librarianship is letting go of all of the legacies that are holding us back. One of the most powerful questions we can ask ourselves as teachers is, "how do I demonstrate that teaching is important to me?" Is it rushing frantically from session to session? Or is it taking the time to reflect and demonstrating a commitment to growth? This day to day practice may feel insignificant; but it is the enactment of our practice that moves us forward.

I think we each have to define for ourselves what resistance means. For me, **my form of resistance is to care**; I work at a university with 5,000 first year students. And it would be easy to say that number is too big and our staff is too small. But instead, I show up everyday and I work with a team of amazing people, all of whom believe in disrupting that narrative. And from that resistance, we create something beautiful that is big enough for 5,000 students to be a part of.

I realized, a long time ago, that I am never going to be the person behind the megaphone. I am the person that makes the email lists, and researchers the ordinances, and brings snacks. I make sure that the people around me are cared for and that they know they are valued. Resistance does not have to be dismantling the system on your own. Instead, I'd like to promote a form of resistance that comes from knowing who you are, honoring your strengths and your limitations, and using your platform to effect change; even when that change is small.

I'd like to end with a reminder that future of teaching librarianship, however big or small it may be, is a responsibility shared by those of us who teach. The profession cannot exist without us as professionals. Our identity and our image is shaped not only by what we do, but also, who we are as individuals and the things we choose to carry forward. How we may choose to conform or dare to resist shapes the work places of which we are a part and the future that future librarians will step into. Day by day, step by step, we create the system in which we work. As we move forward, I'd like to encourage each of us to take our platform seriously. To speak up when we have an opportunity to tell our story, and fall back when we see an opportunity to do less, but better. To treat ourselves, our colleagues, and our future colleagues, with kindness, and to be deliberate in creating the kind of workplace in which we would like to be a part.

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