Librarians as Faculty Association Participants: An Autoethnography

Justine Wheeler (University of Calgary), Carla Graebner (Simon Fraser University), Michael Skelton (Wilfrid Laurier University), and Margaret (Peggy) Patterson (University of Calgary)

BACKGROUND

Librarians have fought and continue to fight for academic status; however once achieved, we have found the label of “academic” to not always be comfortable. Within our community of librarians, questions have been raised regarding our taking on any status beyond that of professional librarian.¹ In spite of this, the reality is that most Canadian university librarians do have academic or faculty status, and are required, through collective agreements or employment contracts, to perform as academics.²

In the Canadian context, understanding the definition of “academic status” and what it means can be obscured by terminology. The terms “faculty status,” “academic status” and “tenure” are used interchangeably in the colloquial sense when, in fact, they have different but often overlapping meanings. In Canada, most librarians working in universities have academic status which, according to the Canadian Association of University Teachers’ policy statement includes: 1) time and provisions for scholarship; 2) procedures and conditions of appointment analogous to faculty, and 3) the right to full participation in university affairs, including governance.³

In contrast, the majority of most American librarians have faculty status, which denotes that they have identical rights, responsibilities and status as do teaching and research faculty.⁴ This includes tenure. By comparison, academic status for Canadian librarians usually means holding the equivalent employment status to tenure through the conditions of continuing employment. Complicating matters further, as Leona Jacobs states in her chapter, most research and discussion on status comes from literature authored by our American colleagues and focuses on faculty status.

Nonetheless, we share many similarities with our American counterparts. Indeed, when we compared the Association of College and Research Libraries’ standards for faculty status to the actual working conditions of Canadian academic librarians, with the

exception of holding tenure, many Canadian academic librarians would meet the criteria outlined for American librarians.5

Regardless of the terminology used or whether librarians have tenure, what can be said is that academic librarians in Canada and in the US have much in common with faculty members within the universities in which they work.

Another area that needs further clarification, with respect to the academic status of librarians, is that of membership in associations or unions for faculty or academic staff. For the purposes of this chapter, we will use the term “faculty association” to refer to both faculty and academic associations, and to both faculty and academic unions and to refer to the body that represents the interests of its faculty and librarian members in collective bargaining and advocacy.

The Board of Directors of faculty associations represents librarians, and other academics, on matters that significantly affect our working lives and identities, including: workload, the right (and even the scholarship imperative) to take leaves, and the nature and means of assigning and assessing our activities, duties and responsibilities. We need this faculty collective to understand and to advocate for the specific needs and rights of academic librarians, especially as we undergo the collective changes that are occurring across many of our campuses, in post-secondary research, and in learning policies and practices.

It should be noted that here are differences between the mandates and bargaining rights of faculty associations and unions, and these differences can vary by province. In broad generalities, unions have the right to strike, while associations do not. The role of unions is also often prescribed by provincial legislation. However, regardless of the type of bargaining unit that exists, academic librarians in these units are treated consistently with other faculty members in their educational setting.

Finally, for the purposes of this chapter, a Board of Directors refers to the elected members of the faculty association whose duty it is to represent and advocate for all faculty members and librarians on issues pertaining to the negotiated collective agreements at their institutions. The Board of Directors usually includes members of the Executive (President, Treasurer, Grievance Officer, etc.). Of course, the structure of boards can vary significantly, as can the delineation of specific roles and responsibilities.

RESEARCHER—PARTICIPANTS

As for the imperative of this issue for the authors, although much has been written in the library literature regarding the need for librarians to participate in academic 

governance, the literature fails to provide data on academic governance participation rates. Notably, one national Canadian study has looked at job satisfaction of university librarians. Perhaps tellingly, in that study, out of 25 variables describing aspects of practice of university librarians, participation in university decision-making ranked as the least satisfying aspect of practice for survey respondents.6

And what of those academic librarians who chose to actively participate in faculty associations? The finding above corresponds with the anecdotal experience of the authors, and it further prompts the question of an investigation into the question of membership and appropriate—or even effective—governance. The authors of this chapter are three librarians and one professor, all of whom have been active in their faculty associations. We are all Canadian-based but located across the country in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. Three of us are women, and two of us have held the position of President of a faculty association. We all have multiple years of experience on our respective boards of directors, and we share many common experiences from this work.

Nevertheless, we also discovered many differences in our working lives. Only one of the librarians was required to do scholarship. The same librarian was also the only librarian whose university grants tenure to librarians. In the case of the other two librarians, permanent continuing positions are granted to librarians at their universities. One of the librarians had spent a career working part-time; the others work full-time. Finally, two of us are near the end of our careers, while the others are mid-career. Despite some difference, we came together with our varied backgrounds, experiences and locales around our common belief in the importance of the work of faculty associations and the desire to delve more deeply into the meaning of our shared experiences working for faculty associations.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

We decided that the most suitable method for us to use to engage in creating collaborative meaning from our experiences was to conduct an autoethnographic study. Autoethnography is a form of interpretive inquiry that is embedded in both the practices and philosophies of narrative inquiry and of ethnography. It explicitly acknowledges and embraces the researcher as participant, and as such, autoethnography is a first person narrative in which the researchers are part of the phenomenon being studied.7 However, autoethnography is not simply about storytelling. Instead, participants are asked to find and to explore the deep meaning in their stories and experiences through an analysis of their dialogues and their openness to shared discovery. In other words, participants seek a deeper understanding of their culture through the sharing and

reflecting on their stories and the association of their stories with others within that culture.\(^8\)

Autoethnography deliberately avoids definition in favour of evocation. As Carolyn Ellis “… autoethnography seeks validity through verisimilitude: it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible.”\(^9\) As such, this method for journeying into the co-creation of shared meaning proved to be appropriate for our exploratory study.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

While autoethnography helped us focus on dialogue and personal stories in order to evoke disclosure it was our theoretical framework of liminality that allowed us to construct deep meaning from our conversations.\(^10\) Liminality, is the process by which an individual undergoes a process of transformation. In his work, “The Rites of Passage,” Arthur van Gennep describes a series of transition rites accompanying various changes in life, relative to social status or milestones.\(^11\) These changes were identified as: separation, transition (or margin) and reaggregation (or incorporation). In his subsequent analysis of Gennep’s work, anthropologist Victor Turner notes that of these three phases, margin is pivotal and is better described using the term “limin”. According to Turner, “… limin—the Latin word for threshold—, signifying the great importance of real or symbolic thresholds at this middle period of the rites, though being cunicular, 'being in a tunnel,' would better describe the quality of this phase in many cases, its hidden nature, its sometimes mysterious darkness).”\(^12\) In its simplest form, liminality is the space between here and there.

Liminality has been used in previous studies to explain the nature of libraries.\(^13\) However, except for Rachel Singer Gordon’s now defunct blog, “The Liminal Librarian” (which had a different focus than this study), liminality has not been used to describe the experience of academic librarians. For us, liminality resonated as an appropriate lens through which to view our work because, as Pamela Bettis, Michael Mills, Janice Miller Williams and Robert Nolan showed in their 2005 study,\(^14\) and further endorsed in a related study\(^15\) liminality can be used both as a theoretical framework and as an

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\(^10\) Bosetti et al., “Betwixt and Between,” 98.


\(^15\) Bosetti et al., “Betwixt and Between,” 98.
explanation for making sense of interactions. It therefore provides a useful framework for grounding our collective experiences. Furthermore, it helped us to understand our experiences, while also providing an explanation of them.

**DESIGN OF STUDY**

Between January and June of 2013, the three librarians met on four occasions via conference calls. Each meeting was approximately one to two hours in length. The meetings were recorded and after each meeting, we separately reviewed the recordings. Dialogue was unstructured in order to allow space for participants to explore various paths to meaning.16 We discussed our backgrounds, what drew us to participate in faculty associations and our experiences within them. During our third meeting, we delved deeper into the themes that most spoke to each of us, all the while “exploring patterns, linkages and images that described our individual and collective experiences of transitioning.”17 Our co-author, who is not a librarian, had previously published an autoethnography, and she guided and advised us through the process.

Balancing what we believe to be important gains in understanding an experience that still remains significantly under-documented, let alone studied, in professional and research literature, the limitations presented by an auto-ethnographic approach encompass many of the criticisms common to all interpretive research. These criticisms include the small participant sample; not meeting standard social science standards; and a questioning of the reliability, validity and generalizability of the study and its findings. These criticisms have been addressed in many articles and in many different ways. For us, the most compelling refutation of potential criticism comes from Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner who eloquently state: “questions of reliability refer to the author's credibility; while validity means seeking versimilitude; and finally, generalizability is constantly being tested by the readers.”18 In other words, it is the reader who is constantly testing the credibility, validity and generalizability of the study through comparing the study to their lived experiences and reflecting on their response to the text.

**EMERGENT THEMES AND DISCUSSION**

As librarians seeking to discover and explore our academic identities, we found our stories by exploring: 1) what conditions led each of us to participate in faculty associations; 2) what our experiences were as members and leaders within faculty associations; and 3) what we perceived as the impact our participation on library and faculty colleagues.

16 Ibid., 100.
17 Ibid., 101.
Through this autoethnographic process, the following five themes emerged: 1) identity; 2) social justice; 3) bridging; 4) professional confidence; and 5) perceptions of other librarians.

**Theme One: Identity—Proud but Invisible**

As libraries change, so too do the identities of librarians. We discussed how apparently self-destructive the profession of librarianship can be. We are gatekeepers, who hold the keys to the information kingdom, yet we are active participants in crafting our own demise through increased development of access and direct discovery to both open source and fee-based electronic scholarly content. While we may see our mediation role as being increasingly important, it seems, paradoxically, to our faculty colleagues and our patrons to be increasingly irrelevant, leaving librarians increasingly challenged to articulate just what it is we do and should do.

Do you remember Erica Olsen’s clarion call to librarians? It was called “Why You Should Fall to Your Knees and Worship a Librarian.” Do you remember Erica Olsen’s clarion call to librarians? It was called “Why You Should Fall to Your Knees and Worship a Librarian.”19 There were t-shirts and posters and we all loved her for articulating so clearly what we believed to be true. Certainly, all of the participants in this research felt a great deal of pride, connection and meaningfulness from their work.

People become librarians because they know too much. Their knowledge extends beyond mere categories. They cannot be confined to disciplines. Librarians are all-knowing and all-seeing. They bring order to chaos. They bring wisdom and culture to the masses. They preserve every aspect of human knowledge. Librarians rule. And they will kick the crap out of anyone who says otherwise.20

This sentiment, while empowering, also reflects an underlying anxiety felt by librarians that they have been marginalized in the academy. Indeed, while university libraries are often seen as the metaphorical hearts of academic institutions, the same can’t necessarily be said of librarians—that role falls to research faculty. It is the research faculty who attract students to their programmes, apply for funding in the form of grants and government support—not the librarians.

_It’s the idea of visibility. We are giving ourselves a voice we didn’t have before. By participating in the faculty association, we move from a degree of marginalization to having a voice and being heard. But then the danger is that with faculty associations, university administration will try and marginalize you again because faculty associations themselves are often marginalized._

There was a sense among the participants that librarians form part of the opaque infrastructure of universities. Yet the reality is that librarians’ expertise in collection

20 Ibid., paragraph 5.
development, instruction, research support, and scholarship, are fundamental to the success of academic institutions.

**Theme Two: Social Justice**

Librarianship is more than just a job. The profession also includes people who are deeply committed to social justice. As Bharat Mehra, Kevin Rioux and Kendra Albright state, “traditions of fairness, open inquiry, service and humanism have long characterized the library and information science (LIS) professions.”

In this regard, perhaps most revealing was our discussion on what drew us to the work of faculty associations. Often it was formative experiences that compounded a societal service ethos with social justice aims within the workplace: one of us described the unfairness she saw at work when she was a non-unionized worker. Another described their grandfather’s work in the union as one of their earliest memories.

*I think it was a reawakening. When I was in my 20s, I was really into social justice and justice issues but then I graduated and then got busy with a job and my family. So when this negative thing happened, I was really open to unions already and had a good perspective. I have found my last four years with the Association really rewarding.*

When asked: “Why did you volunteer to be part of the Executive?” the common answer again centered on the issue of social justice. As librarians, we saw the need to defend ourselves and our colleagues, who we perceived not to be in a position to defend themselves.

*I saw a pattern emerge that the faculty association tended to overlook this group (librarians and archivists) and asked they be mindful going forward not to forget about them …*

We became active in faculty associations because we have a natural tendency toward social justice or because we, or someone we know, benefited from the intervention of their association. We found an impetus or catalyst was involved; something that rankled or hurt—or, a desire to give back. In short, as one of participants stated, it was *time to stick one’s neck out of the tortoise shell* and go from the invisible middle toward taking our place as an academic member. Thus, we began taking the first steps in “our rite of passage” from being uncertain and unsure to moving towards professional confidence.

**Theme Three: Bridging**

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Because some of our colleagues within the academy really don’t understand what we do as professionals, they view librarians as being almost invisible. This allows us to work in the background, and can fly under the radar to accomplish a great many things without a lot of fanfare.

As we sought deeper meaning from our stories, we became aware of a recurring theme in our stories in which we served as information conduits and sounding boards. Perhaps, as academic librarians, we are uniquely suited to view issues from a variety of perspectives. Certainly, we felt that this liminality allows us to occupy an understated central or neutral role. Viewed as being neutral by our faculty colleagues, many of them tend to seek us out to “talk”; to express themselves in a non-threatening environment where they can bounce ideas around and possibly develop a different point of view.

Librarians don’t have a lot of baggage. I felt like Switzerland—I’m seen without an agenda. As a result, I could suggest solutions that didn’t seem to occur to others.

We were the central road—we could see both sides of the issues

We felt that, where many of our colleagues in the Academy tend to see matters only in black or white, from our perspectives as librarians who are involved in their faculty associations, we often view issues in various shades of grey, and often, in colour. That is not to say that we are totally indifferent. When the need arises, we can and frequently have, stood up and taken sides. We have helped to summarize the discussions around us and have been able to put forward a strong voice of reason. Helping individuals to formulate different perspectives has been one of the most rewarding aspects of our position on faculty association boards.

As individuals who work alongside the professoriate, we have the opportunity to lend our voices to the conversation and to supply our organizational expertise to the questions at hand.

Interestingly, even after two of us left senior roles on executive committees, we found that many faculty and librarians still sought us out to discuss issues, knowing that we would listen and reflect honestly on their concerns. As such, we assumed the role of “bridgers” within our academic community. From our accumulated experience, we attempt to bring others along on the journey, point out pitfalls and hurdles, advise on alternate courses of action, and generally encourage members to use and understand the faculty association of which they are members. Indeed, we have acted as cheerleaders and as informal advocates, encouraging our colleagues to seek the advice of their faculty association officers when they encounter decisions by the administration that they think breaches the collective agreement. In this way, we distinguish ourselves from our place of work—the identity of librarian as agent is differentiated from the library as a neutral place. We become visible.

Theme Four: Professional Confidence
While we all have different reasons for actively participating in our faculty associations, our experiences are remarkably similar. In a way, we can each identify with what Joseph Campbell described as the “Hero’s Journey” in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This underlying theme, echoed in Victor Turner’s descriptions of liminality, requires the protagonist to leave the familiar and engage with extraordinary circumstances and events, moving through a series of cycles, both threatening and uplifting, until he/she returns home armed with new gifts, insights and abilities. In our own journey, we moved away from the familiarity and insularity of our libraries into greater contact with research and teaching faculty—and with university administration.

The first year, I didn’t know what people were talking about; issues were from faculties I wasn’t familiar with. I felt lost, a little bored because it was beyond me and I noticed, too, that defacto I was representing the library. Sometimes when I raised concerns, I felt like it was “wee little me” or “little librarian,” representing a small group. I never felt condescended to but I was never sure if they understood where I was coming from.

The wish to contribute and to provide useful context in our interactions with our fellow executive members was tempered somewhat, not only by a feeling of newness, but perhaps more by a need to be accepted and valued as equals. We didn't want to mess this up. We felt as if we carried the reputation of our profession on our shoulders and that no slippage was allowed. Gradually, this specter faded and we felt we belonged as peers. And, with time, our expertise and confidence related to non-library academic matters grew. The journey, however, is never linear, never straight forward, and is affected by circumstances as much as by intent.

There were many times when I felt like an outsider. At first, I didn’t know what to expect, what issues would be discussed, what decisions had to be made. Equally, I’m not sure what the “old guard” on the Executive expected of me.

But belonging was not without challenges. According to Statistics Canada 25% of volunteers put in 77% of the volunteer hours. Over-reliance on a core group of people often leads to the sense that faculty associations are somewhat “cliquish”. They often rely on a familiar group of old hands, with whom they are comfortable. We found that librarian ways were new to them and while they didn’t look down on us, they really didn’t fully understand our challenges. Once we found our “voices,” we took the opportunity to inform our faculty colleagues. After some time, we felt comfortable voicing our concerns from our librarian perspective. It has been a progressive exercise. For two of us, stepping up to be the President of the faculty association was, in large measure, a test of the waters. It was an opportunity to see if faculty members would accept a librarian as their leader of the Association.

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I feel more secure in my own skin in dealing with issues related to the association and faculties. And people seek you out to ask questions and I feel more confident in answering them—the whole idea that we are collegial, we will share our material, and treat others in a respectful manner.

Participation in our respective faculty associations was good for us personally, and we believe important to how academic librarians are perceived by colleagues and administration. We stepped into a realm which had been largely unknown to us. Our success was due, in part, to our willingness to take risks and to gamble that we had much to contribute and these contributions would be valued both by our librarian colleagues and by our academic peers. The payoff was greater recognition of and support for librarians, a better understanding of our rights, honed negotiating skills, a greater understanding that faculty are neither homogenous nor monolithic, and an understanding that we are, in fact, colleagues.

And as a group, we no longer accept statements by administration at face value. We are simultaneously sought out for our opinions by colleagues but avoided by management.

Theme Five: Perceptions of Other Librarians

[Because of] our status as academic staff, [it] is good for my colleagues to see me participating in the faculty association.

During our involvement with our faculty associations, our librarian colleagues suddenly took new interest in the Association’s activities. A certain degree of pride was noted, especially when colleagues would introduce us to visitors to the library. The introduction usually went, “here is _____ s/he is “the President of our Faculty Association”.

My full time professional colleagues in the library were quite proud of the fact that a librarian, and a part-time librarian at that, was elected as President of the Association.

Each faculty association provides information and support to its members and librarians are a microcosm within the association. Research shows that, in the context of information-seeking, individuals turn to their peers before seeking out other resources. As reference librarians, we know this and now we know this as active participants in faculty associations. Our colleagues seek us out for information that they might not have otherwise pursued or perhaps even known existed. We have garnered a wealth of information and now it is incumbent upon us to share it.

[My experience] makes me want to inform colleagues about the Faculty Association and what their rights/obligations are. [It] doesn't have to be all service all the time.

We’re looked at differently, not only by colleagues within the library, but also from colleagues outside of the library. The whole thing has been an affirmation that librarians are part of the academy and we are viewed as having additional value.

Our collective experience as leaders in our faculty associations has helped us as mentors in the encouragement, recruitment, and promotion of younger librarian colleagues. We are in positions to recommend members for special committees and functions. We need to encourage colleagues to step up and take on roles in their faculty associations and not to fear speaking up, particularly because, while the participants of this study may have had positive experiences and impacts in their workplaces, institutional support for faculty associations still varies.

At the end of a 40-year career, I have been prodding my younger colleagues to get involved in the faculty association. I have spent the last year actively mentoring them and encouraging them to gain a better understanding of what their role is in the academy and the association.

It's a heady feeling, as a professional librarian, to be sought out by academic colleagues because of the skills one has. Librarians are recognized for their ability to assess and analyze, for their nuanced and diplomatic approaches and for their ability to unpack difficult situations and provide alternative solutions. At least, this has been our experience. And it has only been enhanced by our involvement with our respective faculty associations. The opportunity to develop these skills, in the context of negotiating with administrators regarding salary, tenure and promotion, and contract language, is not something we would have encountered in our regularly assigned duties.

CONCLUSION

Using autoethnography as a method allowed us to “pull out” our experiences and examine them for meaning. Using liminality as our theoretical framework provided us with an explanation for how we were feeling, which hasn’t previously existed in the library literature. We were able to view our experiences, as academic librarians, as experiencing liminality on more than one level. We construct our identity in a library environment undergoing transition as we concurrently try to move through uncertainty.

We participated in this study because we were motivated by our positive experiences as active members within our faculty associations. We wanted to share these experiences with academic librarian colleagues in the hopes of encouraging their involvement at their respective institutions. Although we suspect our experiences may not be unique—there is very little literature available on the participation of librarians in faculty associations—we wanted to provide a foundation for further research. Indeed, because of the lack of research in this area, we felt we had to perform an exploratory
study in order to ground our future research, and we hope offer paths of exploration for other researchers. We thus based our study wholly upon our own experiences and perceptions, analyzed through the autoethnographic exercise and examined within the framework of liminality. Further, we deliberately made use of first person narrative so that the reader could see himself or herself as the protagonist in our story and—we hope—experience verisimilitude.

As our conversations continued, we found that our stories were remarkably alike, and common themes around identity, social justice and personal development emerged. As we each embarked on our own “Hero’s Journey,” we discovered that the only people holding us back was ourselves. We were already strong, engaged and active before taking on these roles—we couldn’t have taken them on otherwise. What the journey uncovered was a new self-awareness and an affirmation of our strengths as individuals and as librarians.

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