Emotional Labor in Open Access Advocacy: A Librarian’s Perspective

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Abstract

Emotional labor has become a hot topic among academics and with good reason. Emotional labor can be invisible to supervisors but often leads to preventable burnout, depression, or anxiety. This article aims to identify what emotional labor looks like for OER advocates with a focus on librarians, the consequences of extensive emotional exertion, and solutions for the advocate and their supervisor on how to manage emotional labor productively.

Keywords: emotional labor, open access advocacy, working mom, work-life balance
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Before writing this paper, I knew that emotional labor was a part of the role of an open access advocate. However, I had not thought of how it affected me or of the impacts it can have on advocacy. Being an advocate means supporting a cause publicly. That support is tied to, at some level, an emotion, and therefore any labor done within that advocacy will have emotions woven in. My role as an open access advocate began when I was hired as the open educational resources (OER) coordinator for a medium-sized regional university. My experience on a community-focused campus is that being student-oriented means emotional labor is part of the job. The amount of emotional labor can be overwhelming.

Like many of you reading this, I juggle more than OER initiatives on my campus. It is one of my two primary roles on campus as the electronic resources librarian and OER coordinator. These two roles, in my experience, work smoothly alongside one another. The skillset of multitasking, research, and technology literacy needed for working with electronic resources is ideal for the job duties of working with openly licensed materials. Electronic resources can be a very time-consuming operation, and their problems always seem to pop up at the most inopportune times. Yet, it does not have the emotional toll that being a librarian in open access does. The thought processes behind open access advocacy stem from the need for textbook affordability for students and a culture of openly sharing information with everyone. Both sides have a lot of emotions tied to them.

Student loan debt can be crippling, and as someone who is still experiencing the weight of that debt, it is also draining. Librarians have taken up the fight for textbook affordability because it is the one thing they can attempt to actually change. Librarians do not dictate curriculum or textbook adoption, but they work closely with faculty who make those decisions.
There is also the advantage of being set apart from the classroom; librarians will push for innovative ideas and shake up the usual routine. Fostering relationships with faculty allows for honest conversations about alternatives to traditional textbooks. What is not often discussed is the emotional labor involved in these conversations. Faculty with an understandable motivation can feel emotionally attached to a specific text, albeit occasionally a very expensive textbook. The reasons behind loyalty to traditional textbooks are not always clear, but establishing relationships with faculty can bring us a step closer to finding out.

Anyone who has worked with students of any age can easily give an anecdote of emotional labor. For faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators, the emotional tie to students is a part of the job. Not every student comes to a research consultation ill prepared the day before the deadline, but it is not a rare occurrence for academic librarians. It is emotional labor to remain calm, work them through their roadblocks, and manage their stress into productivity.

Students approach OER librarians with a similar level of stress regarding textbook costs. For some first-generation students who come from homes where the college experience is foreign, they come to campus with unrealistic expectations of textbook prices. The weight of this financial burden leads students to the library to seek textbooks or alternatives, such as older editions or other textbooks on the same topic. The library I work at had a long-standing policy against buying textbooks. Textbooks in the catalog were donated by faculty or students at the end of the semester. Now it is part of my role as OER coordinator to use library funds to purchase the digital versions of textbooks with unlimited user access so that it is “free” to students. We also now have a Reserves Shelf behind the Access Services and Circulation Desk, where students can check out a textbook, in-house, for a few hours. Without the push for OERs and affordable textbooks, these initiatives would not be present in the library today. This part of my job involves
positive emotional labor. There is no feeling like being able to email a professor to let them know the library has bought their adopted textbook so that current and future students will be able to access it for free. I always mention future students in my emails to faculty, hoping to encourage the longer adoption of a purchased title.

**Defining Emotional Labor**

To go beyond personal experience, I researched how others defined emotional labor. In the article “Toiling in the Field of Emotion,” Fraad (2008), former President of the International Psychohistorical Association, defines it as “the expenditure of time, effort and energy utilizing brain and muscle to understand and fulfill emotional needs.” As stated previously, emotional labor is invisible; Fraad (2008) broadens this by saying that often, the person performing the labor is unconscious of it. Fraad introduces a term coined by American psychohistorian deMause, “psychogenic pump,” which describes why mothers are most prone to emotional labor. A psychogenic pump gives love and attention exceeding what traditionally the mother received or achieved. This applies to open access when advocates want students to have a better experience than they did. We want to improve lives for students so they do not have to experience hardships that we as advocates have experienced or have seen in other students who were weighed down by the financial burden of expensive textbooks.

Fraad also claims that emotional labor is hard to define because people refuse to acknowledge it. She compares emotional labor to a woman’s domestic duties, which, as she points out, was ignored as real labor until the women’s movement shined a spotlight on it. “Women's emotional labor in these jobs, like our work at home, is expected without being named” (Fraad 2008, 273). This is because emotional labor and physical labor are not separately validated and discussed, but most often lumped together as labor necessary for a specific line of
work. Emotional labor has not only a bearing on women, but men are less likely to value or recognize the emotional labor they exert domestically or in the workplace. Fraad focuses the rest of her article primarily on the role that emotional labor plays in childhood and adolescent development. This emotional labor is important to those who work in higher education because “emotional labor needs also to be as systematically addressed as do other aspects of modern society if we are to prime the psychogenic pump and create independent-minded, compassionate, creative people” (Fraad 2008, 283).

Emotional labor has since become its own field of study in sociology. Wharton (2009), sociologist and Director of the College of Arts and Sciences at Washington State University Vancouver, discusses how Hochschild’s The Managed Heart, published in 1983, sparked a renewed interest in emotional labor because it could provide a new vantage point when discussing emotions in the workplace. Hochschild notes that emotional labor is increasingly seen in service jobs because the worker is more often expected to manage their emotions. Therefore, this emotional task is seen as an occupational requirement. She defines emotional labor as managing one’s emotions to align with organizational policies (Wharton, 2009). Librarians provided these specifications in the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers. The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of ALA first published Guidelines for Behavioral Performance in 1996. Since then, the guidelines have been updated, and they have continued to set a standard for professionals providing research and information services. The guide is broken into five sections: visibility/approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow up (RUSA, 2013). As librarians who champion creating, adapting, or adopting openly licensed materials, these interpersonal skills are needed.
Behavioral responses during reference interviews with students and faculty when discussing OER are crucial to moving towards their adoption.

When discussing the criteria for what type of job requires emotional management, Hochschild listed the following three: contact with the public (verbal or in person), work that involves creating emotional circumstances with a customer, and when the employer has the potential to control emotions shown by the employee(s) (Wharton, 2019). These easily apply to librarians who serve as OER advocates. Student debt is a public issue, and textbook affordability is a part of that conversation. When librarians become involved with the student debt conversation, it can easily be with someone outside of the classroom who still has the power to make an impact on campus, such as alumni, legislators, and prospective students. Back on campus, the OER librarian’s typical interactions are with faculty. We tie emotions to the personal attachment to curriculum, opinions of what “open” and “free” mean in the context of quality, and how this will affect the instructor’s pedagogy and curriculum. The daily activities of a librarian are rarely the same and are often dictated by others’ needs. This is no different for those working in OER. These interactions are full of emotional states that may be out of the librarian’s control, but still within their responsibility to manage. A skill of successful librarianship is how a librarian treats their users. It may not be specifically listed in the library policy to go above and beyond in customer service, but we assume it. Librarian job postings ask for professionals with great interpersonal skills or client service experience. The institutional culture sets the general standard for departmental customer service, so experiences vary.

**OER Advocacy on Campus**

Diversity in culture also relates to how administration and faculty perceive OER. I am at a public, regional university that offers Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programs. At this
university, there is no mandate for OER adoption. I attribute part of this to the faculty’s academic freedom. The administration trusts faculty to adopt the best textbook for their curriculum. Textbook affordability and OER were a conversation on campus before I arrived in the fall of 2018, but there are still several faculty members who do not understand the vast selection available to them with openly licensed textbooks and ancillary materials. The tactic that university administration took was to create a Textbook Affordability Taskforce. I am chair of this taskforce, which comprises department heads and general education faculty. We were set with creating a three-year financial plan for textbook affordability that would be reported to the state. Working with the faculty members on the taskforce, we created a plan that set our campus goal to have each department’s textbook prices decrease by 20%. Faculty set this goal and so now every department has a representative on this task force to champion their department to decrease costs by 20%. This cost-saving goal sparked an interest in OER with several faculty members. This is when I began to realize the emotional labor that would be involved in working with faculty while advocating for students’ opportunities for fewer financial burdens.

Working with other OER supporters outside my university, there have been several conversations about the emotional labor involved. Being a part of OER initiatives outside my campus has led me to state-funded programs through our academic library consortium LOUIS where four groups over ten months created a Louisiana-focused OER repository. The OER in the repository were chosen because they aligned to the learning objectives of the core curriculum at most Louisiana universities or Louisiana Community and Technical Colleges System (LCTCS) career clusters.

More locally, I collaborate with another OER specialist who works in the library of a nearby community college. Their institutional culture is founded on financially incentivizing
faculty to adopt openly licensed materials. The instructors’ monetary payout is based on whether the OER being used in their course is an adaption/adoption or if it is an original creation. Obviously, original works are more highly rewarded financially. Community colleges were founded on being an affordable option to education, so I see larger impacts on their campuses. This is because the campus culture of affordability is already well developed. In the 2017 *Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) College Affordability: Promising State Policies and Practices* report, state-funded initiatives for community college enrollment was one of the main programs evaluated. Tennessee, Oregon, and Minnesota have created tuition-free programs for community college attendance. During the 2015-2016 state legislation sessions, there were at least ten other states being tracked for free community college legislation (Harvey and SREB, 2017).

Oregon has been doing a lot with its OER initiative with Open Oregon. In their 2019 Open Textbook Workshop Report, they boasted an estimated savings of $2,383,200 in student textbook costs since 2015. This workshop was only offered to Oregon’s seventeen community colleges until 2017 when it was extended to their seven universities. For the OER Review Workshops held at fourteen Oregon institutions from 2017-2019, 240 faculty members attended. As part of the workshop, the faculty had to write a review of an openly licensed book. These recent workshops led to $65,200 in student savings after forty-five new adoptions of open access textbooks (openoregon, 2019). Affordability is not a new conversation on community college campuses.

Soon, I expect more universities will take more notice of what community colleges are doing to advocate OER. Universities that have pushed initiatives for textbook affordability or
open publishing curriculum content often choose these new roles to be spearheaded by librarians.

**Librarianship Evolution and Emotional Labor**

In recent years, added stress has caused everyday work to become emotional labor for librarians. One part of this stress is the rising requirement for technology-related skills. Librarians have always filled multiple roles in their jobs, but now with technology’s role in education, institutions are looking for librarians who know course management software, the basics of coding and web layout, and instructional design (Lowe and Reno, 2018). Open access is one of these technology-focused additions. To be a successful OER coordinator for my campus, I have to understand CC licensing, at least a basic knowledge of how to work various open textbook repository sites, how to implement open courseware into our course management system, and how to format their created OER for easy use by their students. For faculty members, overhauling their pedagogy or curriculum from traditional to open can be overwhelming and stressful. As facilitators of open access, it is our role to help manage that stress for them and ease their transition into open education. Emotional labor is not always negative, but even when it is positive, it can be heavy. Again, building relationships with faculty can ease the weightiness of emotional labor.

Shuler and Morgan (2013) did a case study on academic librarians focused on their regular interactions with students and faculty to assess the emotional labor involved. As noted in their study, the librarians did not recognize the term “emotional labor,” but once described, all of them agreed that it was a daily part of their job. The part of their study that stuck out to me was the described joy at feeling appreciated. When discussing emotional labor, it is important to note that the emotional states felt that labor can be joyous and exhausting. Their case study found that
even at the end of a tiring reference interview, given the recognition of a job well done in assisting a student or faculty member lifted the emotional labor for librarians to a more positive spin (Shuler and Morgan, 2013).

Recognition for work done by a librarian, even in OER advocacy, does not mean they are seen as equals to traditional teaching faculty. For academic librarians, fluctuating decisions towards faculty or non-faculty status have become a stressor. ALA Past President Maureen Sullivan felt that the status of faculty was unnecessary for librarians. Those who disagreed with her felt it was vital to their job security. As noted by Lowe and Reno (2018), many librarians already feel the pressure to constantly defend their status and to prove their value professionally.

On my campus, I have interacted with several faculty members who did not know that my role as a librarian was classified as faculty, despite my service on the faculty senate and other faculty committees. Working with faculty on OER adoption or creation has opened the door for me to show faculty what librarians really do. Even in the academic arena, there are still several misconceptions about what librarians spend their days doing.

In discussing what librarians do all day, let us also talk about role overload. As mentioned previously, being the OER coordinator is not my only responsibility on campus. However, I will admit that I have seen a few universities and community colleges advertise for librarian positions that focus solely on open access and textbook affordability initiatives. Not my reality, but an option for other academic librarians. Lowe and Reno (2018) bring up role overload when discussing burnout in academic librarianship. Mastel and Innes (2013) define role overload as the continuous redefining of models and professional responsibilities of librarianship. Taking on campus OER initiatives is definitely part of redefining professional roles for an academic librarian. Librarians have to find a balance in the role overload, and supervisors
have to be mindful of what role transformations they apply to their librarians. “All of the literature focused on burnout in academic librarians agrees that the nature of the job engenders burnout” (Lowe and Reno 2018, 75). However, Lowe and Reno also noted that literature on specific aspects of burnout among academic librarians was lacking. I advocate research in this area for a better understanding of emotional labor, stress triggers of librarianship, and prevention of burnout rather than dealing with the aftermath of it (Lowe and Reno 2018).

**Managing Emotional Labor can Help Prevent Burnout**

One strategy for coping with difficult emotional labor comes from training advice often given to flight attendants. Reframe the behavior, do not take it personally, and imagine the outside reasons this interaction could go poorly (Shuler and Morgan, 2013). Maybe that person just had a fight with someone close to them before this meeting or they are a parent with a child who does not sleep well through the night so they are working on little sleep and more coffee. The stress of getting a course sorted out in time before the semester begins is a big stressor for faculty, especially those who are new to campus. This empathetic method helps alleviate the situation and can help create the foundation for a successful collaboration with faculty in OER advocacy. Empathy is a commonality in several open access conversations I have been involved with or heard about in the OER community. Part of the reason faculty choose to transition to an open resource is being empathetic towards the burdens felt by their students.

Another tactic brought up by Matteson and Miller (2014) is for supervisors to train their employees to recognize emotional labor and empower them to regulate it. Part of this training involves helping faculty and staff members understand communication skills, including how to professionally communicate their feelings, and emotional intelligence, which involves understanding and managing personal emotions and others’ emotional responses. Lastly,
Matteson and Miller suggest managers go outside the traditional memo email and create a training that is interactive and more meaningful to the trainees. This could include reenacting scenarios and using small discussion groups to problem-solve tough situations that require emotional labor (Matteson and Miller, 2014).

Emotion-regulation ability (ERA) is a term introduced by organizational psychologists who look at what causes exhaustion and fatigue at work. ERA is a part of emotional intelligence and, according to Zhao, Li, and Shields (2019), it plays a major role in preventing professional burnout. They found that professionals who tested high for ERA were less likely to experience job burnout and that ERA helps maintain a more positive attitude at work. Zhao, Li, and Shields conclude that supervisors should develop programs and targeted training to help their employees improve their ERA. Enhancing one’s strategies and techniques for regulating emotions leads to fewer cases of burnout (Zhao, Li, and Shields, 2019).

Conclusion

Getting involved with open access allows me to be a part of a community that deals with the same emotional labor, job struggles, and work triumphs. The power of that community, outside your individual workplace, is a positive reinforcement for a job that constantly evolves. To librarians that work with OER, I would recommend being a part of the community through listservs or other online forums. It is great to have support from other librarians in the open access field, but it also gives you perspective from the faculty viewpoint. These forums can give great insight into why some faculty members may be hesitant to go open or concerns they have about using a CC license on their personal materials. Community support for OER advocacy is important, especially when you go through a rough patch and have experienced several “no” responses to adopting an open textbook from faculty. I have a sign on my door that has a quote
from Ruth Bader Ginsburg that says, “Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you” (Vagianos, 2015). It is my constant reminder that I care about open access and that it is going to cause my daily routine to involve emotional labor, but also at the end of the day, that one faculty member who becomes an open access advocate because of my work with them will be worth it all.

References

