Lauren Mee Bennati and Abigail L. Phillips

Seeking connection over competition

A discussion of LIS education during the pandemic

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation addresses being an MLIS student and professor during the pandemic. It is a clarion call for connection and collaboration over competitiveness.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Abigail Leigh Phillips (ALP): Lauren, as an MLIS student who experienced the majority of your coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic, what do you believe were some of the challenges and obstacles while pursuing your degree? Did anything help along your path? You certainly experienced, as a student, something the world, particularly the academic world, was not prepared to manage or deal with.

Lauren Mee Bennati (LMB): I started graduate school in the middle of the 2019–2020 academic year as a dual degree MLIS/MM (master of music, music history, and literature) student, intending to be a music librarian. I was lucky to start most of my introductory coursework in person (including your Foundations of Library and Information Science class) and had a grand total of seven weeks of a "normal" experience until the world ground to a halt.

I certainly faced challenges. I'll go out on a limb and say that Zoom University was NOT my biggest issue. I can deal with discussion posts, dropboxes, and awkward video conference calls all day. What I couldn't deal with (and still can't, to a degree) was feeling like nothing was real. With everyday dealings going virtual and with real life disintegrating before our eyes, I became easily overwhelmed and fell behind in my coursework, to the point where I made the hard decision last semester to drop my music degree in favor of finishing my MLIS by next school year.

On the bright side, I was thankfully able to secure a job with my school's ILL department, and the experience I've gained there has been invaluable. As the world began opening up again and I caught up on my schoolwork, I have been able to attend some conferences where I have spent a majority of my time matching Twitter profiles and Zoom names to actual people. What has really helped me as a student who has had a virtually (pun intended) complete graduate school experience in a pandemic is the connections I have made in person that I cultivated online, which I will talk about a little later.

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This brings me to my question to you, Dr. Abby: your research is based in part on empathy, mental health, and disability. I'm sure you didn't expect to deal with a pandemic in your career. How has your research influenced the way you work with your students?

ALP: I feel that the opposite is true in some aspects. My work with students during the pandemic has impacted my research. To be cliché, the tables have turned. I began to notice slight cues that my students were struggling with the constant distance and, what you describe in part, as nothing being real. I tried to maintain some sense of normalcy with synchronous Zoom classes and snail mail exchanges between myself and the students (establishing some sense of human connection), but we were and are in unbelievable times. Particularly then, when we didn't have a vaccine, verbal wars raged over masks and distancing, lockdowns, and more, the world felt even more out of control and beyond my understanding.

My research background (and personal experience) in mental health certainly did not prepare me for seemingly unending days of both a mixture of boredom, fear, and anxiety. I tried to set up a schedule for myself workwise but that quickly fell apart. I was accustomed to working from home as an academic but not constantly working from home with no social outlet. I do believe my research prepared me for the need to support others, whether it was through my personal letter writing campaign or through consistently upbeat check-ins with students.

LMB: I remember that letter writing campaign, and I believe we exchanged some letters back and forth earlier in the pandemic!

ALP: We did! You mentioned connections you made as a student. Student-to-student relationships are incredibly important and critical for success throughout any graduate program. During the pandemic, since you are a hybrid student, the in-person contact was very limited, if at all. Our program is largely online, but I noticed even those students struggled. I cannot imagine how students on campus were feeling. How did you make and maintain those connections throughout the pandemic? Did you encounter any difficulties or troubles during the lockdown and afterwards?

LMB: You better believe I did, and I still do sometimes struggle with keeping up with my coursework, but the challenges as far as that aspect is concerned have shifted from having no aim at all, to now having several demands of my time and my space by going to conferences, attending committee meetings over Zoom, working as much as I can (these conferences are NOT cheap, especially if you're paying for them yourself, but that's a whole other can of worms) and, most importantly, making sure I stay on top of my coursework. All this while still wondering where I belong in this field. Balancing the demands of my time and energy is NOT easy by any stretch, and while I wish I would have taken advantage of the contemplative aspect of lockdown, I am still glad I'm able to *go* and *do* things now.

I do not take the privilege of travel lightly (both for conferences and for leisure). I know it goes against the grain, but I continue to be very COVID cautious and keep the masking/distancing/sanitizing efforts in place from lockdown so that (1) I do not get sick and spread illness in either the community I'm visiting or the community I live in, and (2) that everyone who wants to go to in-person events might be able to, given a collective effort to not catch and spread illnesses like COVID. In-person events like conferences have been so helpful to me, and I feel that in order to keep doing these, I need to make an effort to make sure that other people can enjoy them, too.

As far as making and maintaining positive relationships in this field is concerned (both with my peers and with established professionals), I have a few friends I've made online, both within my program and all around the world (thank you Twitter!), but it was when I emerged from lockdown by traveling for leisure and attending conferences starting last year that I felt like I was *finally* beginning to hit my stride. Being able to connect with friends I've met online, and especially reconnecting with my two mentors that I had during college that I have so much respect and appreciation for has given me a sense of purpose, which I have sorely needed as I've been trying to pick myself up and dust myself off.

I will also say that I still have conflicting feelings from emerging from lockdown prematurely (since there are people whose lives have been completely upended from having COVID), but I do understand and can empathize with how lonely most of us have felt (and continue to feel) as we begin to move on from how life has been for the past few years. As I've been making and maintaining friendships or rekindling the ones I had before lockdown, there is this overarching sense of loneliness that I sense from a lot of the people.

Dr. Abby, you know how we have that fifth frame in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy ("Scholarship as Conversation"), right? I know that ACRL means this by way of writing and publishing papers, but an oft-forgotten part of this field is going out and connecting with people and *actually* talking to them (not just the librarian-patron interaction, but library worker-to-library worker interactions too). As I have been in conversation with some of my closest professional relationships, I have found that loneliness, and NOT a lack of productivity, is a prevailing emotion in this profession, yet it is not often talked about. Do you also perceive this? If you do, why do you think we don't talk about loneliness in this profession?

ALP: I'm so glad you mentioned this. I've found that academia itself is a lonely environment. We all strive to excel and achieve throughout our various graduate programs that we often neglect the more social aspects of being a student, friend, and colleague. Honestly, I believe that competitiveness has a role to play in advancing this lonely experience. Competitiveness and comparing yourself to others is highly encouraged if not expected. We fight for the same awards, grants, jobs, etc., throughout our careers. None of this is particularly healthy and, in many ways, adds to the loneliness we experience.

From what I can see from students, faculty, and others, COVID had a significant impact on our work, social interactions, and daily lives. We are still so isolated. Much of our everyday work takes place through Zoom or Teams or from home. COVID isolation has changed the way we perceive work and how we expect others to work. Doctoral and masters programs are isolating on their own, but with this added online-only component, it feels that we are even more lonely.

I wish we talked about loneliness more. It seems like such an embarrassing feeling to express to others. I think the average person finds it difficult to share his/her/their experience with loneliness. In our field, we can be so siloed into our own branches of librarianship. We often do not reach out to our colleagues to share what we are going through. The only way loneliness can be overcome is by sharing our struggles with loneliness and seeking help.

LMB: I agree. I will also say that the field that I am most used to (music) has this same issue of how the competitive nature of that field often takes precedence over everything else. I think I can speak for those of us who work in and with music (as well as librarianship) when I say that this drive to do more/be more/be better overtakes every other aspect

of how we view ourselves as we work and how we retrospectively view the legacy we leave behind. What is the point of being "successful" (whatever that means) if we have achieved it at the expense of isolating people who have similar goals by way of viewing success through a competitive lens?

I hope that, as I go out in the world and be someone who works with information and music, that I will be able to encourage the people that I work with to look outside of themselves and their own individual careers in favor of fostering real, fulfilling, and supportive relationships with like-minded people. As cliché as this is, I really do think that we are all more alike than we are different. Times are hard, I think a lot of us are lonelier than we care to admit, and it does nobody any good to view our colleagues first and foremost as rivals. None of us can go this alone, and I think that the sooner we prioritize collaboration over competition, we just might see morale improve. ⁊