

Johanna M. Jacobsen Kiciman and Alaina C. Bull

Apprenticeships, MLIS Students, and Neurodiversity

Centering the Humanity of Student Workers, Part 1

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *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. This two-part conversation demonstrates that student labor is labor and that our student workers and apprentices need room to grow and advocate for their own needs.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Alaina C. Bull: Johanna, let's start by telling a bit about ourselves. I am a queer, white woman who is married to my partner of 18 years and raising two children. I was a non-traditional undergraduate, having dropped out of college and returned several times before completing my degree. This experience shapes my approach to academic librarianship. My pathway through education and career has been heavily impacted by my own neurodivergence.

Johanna Micaela Jacobsen Kiciman: I am a queer, multiply neurodivergent, cis-gendered white woman who was raised in a solidly upper-middle class family with strong ties to higher education. I hold a PhD in Folklore and an MLIS. As such, there are many privileges that were afforded to me. I only acknowledged parts of my identity in my early 40s, which meant that I had to structurally dismantle internalized homophobia and ableism. As you mentioned, Alaina, dismantling systems of power is at the center of my academic pursuit. I am married with two nearly grown children.

So, let's dive in. We are here to converse about the idea of apprenticeship in library and information science, and how it is a model that is more neuroinclusive and anti-capitalist than traditional employment models. Ideas around apprenticeship emerged alongside my deepening research into feminist frameworks, but also coincided temporally with a pandemic in which capitalist structures of labor defined solely as productivity were being challenged on a global scale. Alaina, you and I saw the potential of a kinder, gentler, more inclusive work environment in which a person's needs were being met—for the first time in perhaps my entire working career.

Those realizations led us to the integration of neurodivergent inclusive practices in our multi-year process of redefining and rebuilding our learning employment program for currently enrolled MLIS students. A neuro-inclusive framework emerged for training and management that centered values of inclusivity and belonging. And if we really want to get

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radical in this conversation, let's not forget to discuss how an apprenticeship model might even obviate the need for an MLIS degree.

Alaina, how did you learn your skills in the LIS world before your first titled librarian job? Did you have apprenticeship-based learning?

Alaina: I was lucky enough to have gotten a graduate student position while I was in an MLIS program, and the position was very heavily focused on instruction. In my MLIS classes, I was one of 3 or 4 people in the room that had any actual experience in the skills that we were discussing. We were reading 1,000 pages of theory on reference, instruction, programming, etc., but not actually experiencing them. So I was very aware that my experience from that employment gave me a different perspective from my classmates who were just doing the coursework.

Johanna: I also had a graduate reference position that was nearly all reference work at an extraordinarily busy reference desk. My job had a clearly defined scope and a clearly defined purpose of keeping a desk open. What I am getting at is the idea that experience and hands-on learning matters. We both had experiences which helped us get our first titled librarian jobs. But as graduate students, we did not get to holistically try all aspects of librarianship; nor did our information school rise to meet these experiential learning gaps.

Alaina: Agreed. In addition to the emphasis on research and instruction, my position had a lot of small projects, little tastes of other librarian work. What was missing was the step-by-step of concrete tasks and how those related to theory.

When I first started at my current job and needed to weed for the first time, I asked my supervisor at the time: "How do I do this?" And I was told to just pull a list and give it to access services, and I was given no actual help and direction. What list? Where do I pull it from? As a grad student it felt like there was this idea that you will get these specific experiences when you get your first librarian job. Then you get your first librarian job, and it is assumed that the experience you already had means that you can do all aspects of the job. But the work experiences we actually had as students were limited to the very rigid bounds of student positions.

Johanna: As amazing as our supervisors were, we both worked at places that had embedded hierarchies. I think that context further limits the ability for graduate students to be able to explore all aspects of librarianship. Additionally, in capitalism, labor is designed to benefit an institution/system. Library graduate student employment, as it most frequently exists, helps fill labor gaps and keeps a system going. Students can learn one skill, but that learning benefits the institution. How do we shift labor to benefit the person conducting it?

In the middle of the pandemic, you and I inherited the supervision of the graduate student program at our current institution, and we received training materials that were deeply hierarchical and focused on staffing the research help desk. The labor offered to students was definitely happening with the goal to keep a desk staffed.

Alaina: We asked to supervise the grad student program because we both had a lot of feelings around what we would have liked as grad students to help prepare us for professional employment. We both wanted to answer a lot of the bigger "why" questions that we, as neurodivergent people, are constantly trying to answer. We were going into management and mentorship with the idea of wanting to make it better for the grad students coming behind us.

When we inherited the program, we received training documentation that was full of vocational awe and prescriptiveness. It said things like, "You need to have open body language"

and “Make sure you are smiling to welcome people.” There was this prescriptiveness saying that in order to do this job you must inhabit the space in this specific way. This felt so ridiculous because the point of the research help is facilitating the inquiry of information and the ability to connect people. It also said: “You never tell a patron no,” which, as someone who has worked in some form of customer service for over 20 years, I know that there are absolutely reasons you tell people “no,” especially in situations with harassment and inappropriate boundary crossing which is a reality of our work.

So instead of that lack of agency, we should be teaching student workers ways to establish their own personal boundaries that are safe and help them do the job. We should be teaching early career workers to do the job in a way that isn’t going to completely burn them out, especially within the context of neurodiverse experiences. The amount of emotional and physical labor it takes to perform neurotypical expectations is a huge part of burnout for people under the neurodivergent umbrella. I remember looking at the document and asking, “What do we actually want to accomplish?”

Johanna: Yes! There is no room in a model built on hierarchy and vocational awe for humanness and individuation. At the time, we did not label this training material as ableist. But it was an ableist document, and this sort of training would have felt terrible to us as neurodivergent folk.

While the narrative we are telling here feels intentional, our changes to the materials were embodied and contextual. Changing pandemic needs meant our library went fully remote for well over a year, and students no longer could staff a desk for the expected 15 hours. So, we shifted the work expectations in a way that allowed graduate students to get valuable experiences while they continued to get paid. This work, it turns out, had unintentional anti-capitalist ramifications!

We initially struck out the pieces that looked like vocational awe and the pieces that felt performative (smile, never say “no”). Next, we changed our documentation to tell incoming students that we viewed them as professional colleagues who were not here to fill in the gaps of labor librarians did not want to do, but rather to find their interests and hone their skills across multiple areas of librarianship.

Alaina: Exactly! This change in framing has been monumental and we’ll share much more about our process next month. 