Shifting Roles: discursively constructing the identities of library and museum educators during the pandemic

Jacqueline Kociubuk[a], Amy Mueller[b], Dr. Peter Wardrip[c], and Dr. Rebekah Willett[a]

[a]Information School, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
[b]University of Oklahoma, USA
[c]Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

kociubuk@wisc.edu, awenger@wisc.edu, wardrip@wisc.edu, rwillett@wisc.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the shifting roles of youth service librarians and museum educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. While changes in job duties, processes and day-to-day practices were inevitable, the article argues that practitioners viewed their service as continuous with pre-pandemic roles. Based on interviews with 20 practitioners, the article analyzes two constructs that emerged as professionals described their pandemic roles: *guiding principles* and *collaboration*. Not only did these discursive constructs provide a sense of continuity, but they also served to advocate for the role of libraries and museums. These findings indicate the importance of reflecting and drawing on guiding principles and collaborations to make decisions about services during times of crisis.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; Museums; Community engagement.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Professional Identity; Discourse Analysis; COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a multitude of unexpected challenges and changes for many library and museum educators. To better understand how these educators made sense of their shifting roles during the pandemic, this paper[1] examines interview data with youth services librarians and museum educators. Findings reveal that rather than focusing on the major shifts in their day-to-day practices, the library and museum educators discursively constructed

---

[1] An extended version of this paper has been recently accepted and is being published in an upcoming issue of *The Library Quarterly*.

their shifting roles as continuous with their pre-pandemic ones. In constructing their roles in this way, professionals drew on discourses that connected their roles with guiding principles and collaboration, indicating potential implications for LIS education to help better prepare new professionals for their future roles as public servants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While crisis-management responses by information institutions may seem novel, historical precedent has indicated this is nothing new. Indeed, libraries during multiple 20th century crises reacted and pivoted to serve new community needs such as: providing entertainment during the Great Depression, collecting books for WWII soldiers, creating STEM education opportunities through the Cold War, and documenting civil rights efforts (Jaeger et al., 2021). Into the 21st century, natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy have shown that community service providers - like library or museum educators - can be "second responders" during crises by providing community access to information and improving community outcomes related to resilience (Stricker, 2019, 13). Additionally, local libraries that stayed open during the recent Ferguson protests helped with "solidifying the library as the community's center" and provided spaces for civil discourse around social justice topics (Cottrell, 2015, 20).

However, unlike these examples, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical spaces of public libraries and museums were often shut-off or restricted to the community (Galani & Kidd, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). While some voices called for libraries to find benefits in a pause, such as providing time for more thoughtful decisions and building more supportive work environments (Heller, 2021); other public libraries and museums sought ways to provide services during the crisis (UNESCO, 2021). Many public librarians redeveloped previous offerings to fit an online environment (Subramaniam & Braun, 2021) and recognized the need to reach those who lacked digital and/or internet access (Furbee, 2021). Museums expanded their digital reach in similar ways: using telecommuting software, videos, and redeveloping in-person programming for digital spaces (Ennes, 2021). Museums also used this time for "future-oriented thinking" to expand their profile, reimagine and strengthen their role in the community, and develop permanent exhibits; while others focused on making museums more inclusive and accessible (Cecilia, 2021).

Despite these shifts, responses by public libraries and museums during the COVID-19 pandemic have been under a more critical lens, with recent studies highlighting crucial areas for improvement and rethinking amid laudation (Mehra, 2021; Santos et al., 2021). Co-design work with youth services public librarians during the pandemic has revealed that many struggled with moving beyond fulfilling short-term needs and reaching more vulnerable community members (Subramaniam & Braun, 2021). Museums, on the other hand, struggled with issues of funding, a significant drop in cultural tourism, and defining the role of technology in museums (UNESCO, 2021). Research categorizing the variety of responses from public libraries found that many remained focused on passive and active approaches, which, respectively, minimized community interactions or focused on changing approaches to services (Mansourian, 2020). Calls were issued for public librarians to assume more of a "social justice warrior role" during COVID-19 by focusing on ways of improving information equity for their communities (Mehra, 2021, 386).

Similarly, museum educators have struggled to address diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, particularly how to adequately address the Black Lives Matter movement in a time of intersecting crises (Santos et al., 2021) and how to reach historically marginalized populations online despite the digital divide (Zollinger & DiCindio, 2021). Public libraries and librarians that adopted proactive approaches, ones involving considerable changes to their previous services, were found to be more effective at serving their community than the other types of approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mansourian, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The data set employed here is from a larger IMLS-funded grant project, *Designing Home Learning Materials for High-Need Families: Lessons from/for Museums and Libraries,* which examined online and remote learning resources for children and families developed by museums and public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these proceedings focus on interviews with library and museum educators, the project also included a website analysis of library and museum sites, a survey questionnaire of practitioners from children's museums and public libraries, and interviews with parents and caregivers. Library and museum educators were recruited for 30–40-minute semi-structured interviews from May to July 2021 through known contacts, snowball networking, and social media recruitment posts. Interviewees included twenty educators who work with children and families (11 from museums and 9 from libraries in urban, suburban, and rural areas) with various roles including coordinators, managers, program designers and youth service librarians. Analysis of data draws on a form of discourse analysis developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), viewing talk as a social act which reflects and constitutes a view of reality and serves particular social purposes. The analysis seeks to understand the functions and characteristics of particular discourses employed by professionals.

ANALYSIS

In analyzing interview data about shifting roles during the pandemic, two constructs emerged as professionals described changes in their duties, processes and day-to-day practices: *guiding principles* and *collaboration*. Interestingly, by employing these discourses, professionals were able to describe their role as *continuous* with their pre-pandemic roles, despite the obvious changes in their day-to-day practices. Further, these discourses served to advocate for the role of their institutions during times of crisis. Rather than focusing on what changed, interviewees positioned themselves and their institutions as steadfast community service providers.

Guiding principles discourse

Our interviewees highlighted the amount of time, energy, and thought that went into the provision of services to families during the pandemic. We heard about complex logistical matters such as creation and distribution of hundreds of take and make kits or busy curbside pick-ups. Before delving into these new logistical manager roles, professionals needed to prioritize and make decisions about what to offer communities. Some professionals stated explicitly that their "mission" drove their decisions and also motivated them to do the work required to transform services during the pandemic. For example, this museum educator frames the museum's pandemic service this way: "I think the motivation was to stay connected and to still fulfill our

mission. We just have a different vehicle to fulfill it in." This educator stresses the role of their "mission" in guiding the work they did during the pandemic which enabled them to "stay connected" with families. Although the service looked different it was consistent with their mission.

For some interviewees, having a clearly internalized mission statement provided the means to maintain their identity and adjust their services. This urban librarian identifies the central tenet of libraries as *providers of resources* and as *community connectors* and indicates that in the pandemic, these roles did not change:

> I would hope that we are, kind of, central to a lot of people's lives, as far as resources that we provide. And in some ways, hopefully, we…seamlessly switched over to what we could do…people were trying to make connections and [see] how they could impact the community.

This excerpt exemplifies statements we collected from others when talking about continuity of services, particularly the focus on making connections, a strong desire to act quickly to "impact the community". Being able to enact their mission of connecting to their community provided this professional with a feeling of a "seamless" transition which happened "almost instantly". However, in line with any mission statement, this is an aspirational role, as indicated by the interviewee's use of the words "hope" and "hopefully". As Braun and Subramaniam (2020a) have documented, during the pandemic, decisions were often made through a top-down approach which was informed by pressure from stakeholders outside libraries rather than in a more co-design fashion with library staff. Further, Braun and Subramaniam (2020b) indicate that while library staff prioritize equity, conversations are often in relation to access to technology rather than developing a deeper understanding needs of communities; there is work to be done in "rethink[ing] policies toward aligning library services with the needs of the community" (Braun & Subramaniam, 2020b).

While there was pressure to pivot quickly and provide analogous services such as virtual storytimes or museum visits, with staff cut-backs, furloughs, and new demands, professionals needed to prioritize. One means of prioritizing was to pause and consider the mission of their institutions; however, in a crisis it is hard to push the pause button (Heller, 2021). A librarian in an urban setting expressed a desire to do more reflective work as an institution, and also described how this work is often prevented by "pressure between keeping our buildings afloat and taking our services into the community". This same librarian described the process of using their guiding principles to prioritize their services during the pandemic:

The families that we are trying to support the most in this moment of crisis are the families who are struggling to get access to Internet service. So, why would we be putting our energy into a story time…there are 5 million other virtual story times. This librarian was able to pause services, consider the needs of different families in their community, and then prioritize the needs of families who did not have Internet access. For this librarian, guiding principle discourse provides a framework for her argument that continuity is not about what services to provide (such as storytimes), rather, continuity is about who they are serving ("families who are struggling").

Collaboration discourse

As is evident in the excerpts discussed above, guiding principle discourse often made reference to maintaining an outward focus. Across the interviews, professionals discursively constructed collaboration as key to enacting their guiding principles. Collaboration discourse is marked by an emphasis on listening to partners and remaining flexible in order to be responsive to partners' needs. Further, the discourse constructs collaborative processes as taking time as partners build relationships; therefore, collaboration discourse serves to advocate for deliberate and gradual approaches to service, as discussed above. Finally, professionals employed collaboration discourse to advocate for their roles as skilled partners.

Overwhelmingly, interviewees mentioned expanding their range of collaborations during the pandemic. Many professionals mentioned involvement in new city-wide committees or broader ranging groups such as system-wide youth library work in more rural areas. These new roles for professionals offered opportunities for collaborative work to meet the needs of families as well as for advocacy for their institutions. This urban museum educator described the importance of these new partnerships "our relationship with the city totally became stronger, because we were able to come through and meet community needs". These new roles served to meet needs of families as well as highlighting the mission, skills and experience of professionals in museums and libraries. Partnerships reinforced and strengthened professionals' identities as skilled service providers dedicated to meeting community needs. As in this excerpt, collaboration discourse was inevitably positive and served as a point of advocacy for professionals. The librarian's statement above suggests a sense of accomplishment. The interviewee draws on this collaboration discourse to highlight the skills she and other librarians brought to "the city," and in this way, one function of collaboration discourse is to advocate for the profession and for the role of libraries in communities.

Many of our interviewees mentioned collaborations with schools and described drawing on existing partnerships or developing new collaborations. The collaboration discourse is marked by responsiveness: interviewees stressed their role as second responders, first listening to educators and then responding to their specific needs. This rural museum educator describes her changing role in relation to collaborations with schools:

> There are always challenges…figuring out what they wanted and needed, that's why I did a ton of just listening to teachers and continuing relationships I already had because they were so overwhelmed, they couldn't add anything else. So, it really took a while for our field trips to kick off, to really get going because teachers weren't ready. And so, I just tried to listen and keep saying, "Hey, how can I help you?"... it was just always flexible and being available

In this excerpt, collaboration discourse is marked by an emphasis on *listening* to understand teachers' situations and *flexibility* to respond to ever-changing needs. The discourse serves to acknowledge the time required by library and museum partners to understand their communities' needs and suggest ways a pandemic collaboration might work. This aligns with the guiding principles discourse: to be intentional about services, library and museum professionals needed to pause, allow time for reflection, and give partners time to figure out their situation.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED

The pandemic undoubtedly created enormous changes in services and day-to-day job duties for librarians and museum educators working with children and families. However, when talking with professionals, they positioned their professional identities as consistent with their pre-pandemic roles. Interviewees described the desire to pivot immediately when the stay-at-home order was announced in March 2020, requiring quick decisions about their services. In employing guiding principles and collaboration discourses to describe these decisions, professionals highlighted the need to pause, reflect and draw on their identity and skills as service providers in communities. As second responders (Stricker, 2019), librarians and museum professionals are expected to pivot quickly in times of crisis. Drawing on guiding principles, collaborative skills and new and/or existing partnerships can help ensure continuity and advocate for the role of libraries and museums in communities.

Our research points to two lessons for LIS educators. First, from these interviews it was clear that guiding principles such as mission statements and institutional values helped educators decide on appropriate responses under crisis. For LIS education, this means that we need to help students see the value of understanding, applying, and communicating guiding principles in practice. We need to build in time for students to compare mission statements, understand the complexities of applying mission statements, and see how mission statements work in the decision-making process. Students should see how principles help institutions be adaptable, resilient, and responsive in times of crisis. Second, interviewees' discourse around the value of community collaborations indicates that future LIS professionals need to see the importance of making space for community voices, particularly those that are underserved or marginalized. Turning outwards to cultivate relationships with the community can help libraries gain access to underserved groups and better identify community needs (ALA, 2015; Mills et al., 2019). In addition, LIS educators have an active role to play in raising awareness about bottom-up approaches to inform creation and implementation of guiding principles, so that community needs are at the forefront of library and museum educators' work. LIS educators might have students reflect on what it means to be a public servant, as inspiration, using Braun and Subramaniam's (2020b) words: "Public servants make decisions with community members. Library servants make decisions for them."

REFERENCES

ALA. (2015). Communities have challenges, libraries can help: A step-by-step guide to "turning outward" to your community. *Libraries Transforming Communities.* https://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/LTCGettingStarted_DigitalWork book_final010915.pdf

Braun, L. W., & Subramaniam, M. (2020a). Retire those legacy approaches. It's time to be bold and innovative. *School Library Journal.* https://www.slj.com/story/retire-those-legacy-approaches-its-time-to-be-bold-and-innovative-reimagining-libraries

Braun, L. W., & Subramaniam, M. (2020b). The right and wrong way to make decisions in a crisis. *School Library Journal*. https://www.slj.com/story/the-right-and-wrong-way-to-make-decisions-in-a-crisis-reimag ining-public-libraries-covid

Cecilia, R. R. (2021). COVID-19 Pandemic: Threat or Opportunity for Blind and Partially Sighted Museum Visitors? *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies,* 19(1), 1-8. http://doi.org/10.5334/jcms.200

Ennes, M. (2021). Museum-based distance learning programs: Current practices and future research opportunities. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning,* 22(2), 242-260. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v22i2.5225

Furbee, B. (2021). Old-School Outreach: Libraries find new value in offline engagement amid COVID-19. *American Libraries,* 52(6), 14-15. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2021/06/01/old-school-library-outreach/

Galani, A., & Kidd, J. (2020). Hybrid material encounters–Expanding the continuum of museum materialities in the wake of a pandemic. *Museum & Society,* 18(3), 298-301. https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/file_store/production/267881/30CB8796-C46A-496A-AB38-A9 EFD3159EF0.pdf

Heller, M. (2021). Making Room for Change through Rest. *Information Technology and Libraries,* 40(2), 1-2. https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v40i2.13513

Jaeger, P. T., Taylor, N. G., Gorham, U., & Kettnich, K. (2021). The light, of course, in the library: pandemic, protests, and being what the community most needs. *The Library Quarterly,* 91(1), 1-4. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/711629

Mansourian, Y. (2020). Public libraries' services during a pandemic. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, 9, 41-54. http://www.qqml.net/index.php/qqml/article/view/616

Mehra, B. (2021). Libraries reclaiming "social justice warriors" during "Miss Rona's" global pandemic crises. *The Library Quarterly,* 91(4), 385-401. https://doi.org/10.1086/715919

Mills, J. E., Campana, K., & Martin, M. H. (2019). Engage, cultivate, provide, and assess: An outreach model for serving all children and families. *Association for Library Service to Children.* https://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/white-papers/engage-cultivate-provide-as sess

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. New York, NY: Sage.

Santos, P., McCray, K. H., Fernandez, G., & Rundahl, A. T. (2021). Documenting Museum Education during Intersecting Pandemics. *Journal of Museum Education,* 46(4), 402-405. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10598650.2021.1997241

Stricker, M. (2019). Ports in a storm: The role of the public library in times of crisis. *Collaborative Librarianship,* 11(1), 4. https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol11/iss1/4/

Subramaniam, M., & Braun, L. (2021). Changing the mindset of pre-service librarians: Moving from library servants to public servants. In *ALISE 2021 Conference Proceedings, Illinois, 2021.* https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/110931

UNESCO. (2020). Museums around the World in the face of Covid-19, Report No. 0000376729. Paris, FR: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373530

UNESCO. (2021). Museums around the World in the face of Covid-19, Report No. 0000373530. Paris, FR: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376729

Zollinger, R., & DiCindio, C. (2021). Community Ecology: Museum Education and the Digital Divide During and After COVID-19. *Journal of Museum Education,* 46(4), 481-492. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10598650.2021.1983711