



TYCA Working Paper #7: Making the Emotional Labor of Open-Access Teaching Visible

Two-Year College English Association
Workload Task Force

Date: November 2020

Authors: Holly Hassel, Patrick Sullivan, and McKenna Wegner

Additional Contributors: Joanne Baird Giordano, Jeff Klausman, Liz Tinoco

Abstract

In Fall of 2019, the Two-Year College English Association distributed a 39-question survey to two-year college English faculty through professional listservs, regional distribution lists, and social media platforms. We received 1,062 responses to questions about workload in the areas of teaching, service, and professional development. This working paper focuses specifically on a qualitative analysis of the 596 responses to the open-ended question, “What aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others?” This paper examines the major theme of emotional labor.

Overview

In the chapter “Emotions at School” in his book, *Permission to Feel*, psychologist Marc Brackett notes that

students watch their teachers closely, paying attention to each facial expression, every gesture, the rise and fall of their voices. They’re constantly picking up information on how teachers feel about the topic, about teaching, about them as students. That emotional subtext exists in every lesson ever taught—whether the teacher intends it or not. (204)

A significant cohort of respondents to our survey identified the “emotional labor” of teaching as a key variable in their working lives. A basic definition of emotional labor in this context is the degree to which our jobs entail recognizing, understanding, and managing the emotions of students, colleagues, and ourselves. Our survey data suggest this is a complex and demanding task at the two-year college, with a kind of layering of the emotional demands on teachers. These compounding variables include large class sizes, numbers of sections taught, differing levels of student preparation at open admissions institutions, full-time or adjunct status, level of administrative support, and overall lack of awareness of, respect for, and valuing this vitally important dimension of teachers’ work.

Literature Review

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild first coined the term “emotional labor” in 1983 and though it has a relevance to a range of social and interpersonal contexts, its specific implications for the academy are explained by Sechelski and Story who define academic emotional labor as “the work of managing one’s emotions in a way that will produce a particular attitude or outlook in

others; performance of emotional labor can include repressing emotions that are genuinely felt, as well as expressing faked (in surface acting) or conjured (in deep acting) emotions congruent with organizational expectations." Additional work by Lindquist (2004), Payne (2019) and Micciche (2002 and 2016) has sought to hone in the specific dimensions of writing studies and academic emotional labor, whether in service, mentoring, or teaching responsibilities. Emotional labor appears to be gendered in some predictable and unfortunate ways, with women carrying much of the load for this work in the classroom (Flaherty), an area that is addressed briefly in the TYCA Working Paper #4 on service responsibilities as well as in articles by June (2018); and Jimenez (2019). White women and people of color take on a disproportionate amount of mentoring and service work and perform more emotional labor as part of their teaching duties.

Methods

The TYCA Workload survey consisted of 39 questions: six demographic questions, 28 closed-ended items that asked respondents to select from a list of possible responses, and five open-ended items. The TYCA Workload Task Force conducted a mixed-methods analysis of responses to the survey using descriptive statistics to analyze closed-ended responses. We also applied iterative thematic analyses of open-ended responses to survey questions using Dedoose (a web-based platform for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research) to code each response.

In analyzing the nearly 600 open-ended responses to question 33, "What aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others?" emotional labor emerged as a significant theme. Within this category, we drilled down to look at the most frequently co-occurring codes that intersected with emotional labor. We analyzed 596 separate responses to this open-ended question, and the code "Emotional Labor" was applied 193 times to 109 responses. It sometimes occurred more than once within a specific response, such that 109 excerpts from the data set had this code attached. To understand with more nuance what role emotional labor has in regard to workload, we looked at which additional codes intersected most often with those 109 excerpts (individual coded 'utterances'). Of the 21 other codes that could co-occur, the following appeared most often with "Emotional labor" include the following:

- Emotional Labor x Challenges Students Face (37/193 codes, 53/109 excerpts);
- Emotional Labor x Material Conditions (22 of 193 codes, 55 of 109 excerpts);
- Emotional Labor and Student Development (18/193 codes, 26 excerpts/109); and Student Readiness (20/193 codes, 34/109 excerpts), which were grouped together because of their interrelatedness.

Report on Findings

After the codes "assessment"¹ and "material conditions,"² "emotional labor" was the third most prevalent code application in this robust data set. One important note is that there were 193 codes applied, resulting in 109 excerpts. We saw a greater density of this code in a smaller number of responses, suggesting that this code may be significant, but also more concentrated among a fewer number of responses than others (though our method of data collection did not permit us to track the relationships between demographic data and the responses that emphasized this theme). Put another way, emotional labor appears to be a significant

¹ The overlap of assessment labor and visibility is reported in TYCA Working Paper #6.

² The overlap of the material conditions of labor and workload visibility is reported in TYCA Working Paper #8.

component of the work of teaching at the two-year college, but it was certainly of greater concern and emphasis to some respondents than others. It was more intensively represented across fewer responses than "Assessment" and "Material Conditions." Although in this working paper we also look at some of the co-occurrences between emotional labor and material conditions. It is important to note that within this category, respondents consistently balanced their comments about the emotional labor demanded by their work with comments about the joy and satisfaction they derive from it.

Emotional Labor and Student Challenges (37/193 codes, 53/109 excerpts)

First, this cohort of responses identified the wide range of challenges two-year college students face outside the classroom can have a significant impact on students' ability to learn inside the classroom. Because of the nature of English classes, writing instructors routinely bear witness to student personal challenges and basic needs insecurity. These include food and housing insecurity; cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges; student/work life balance; and needs for guidance outside of academics. Writing instructors, therefore, routinely enact significant emotional labor in the daily work of interacting with students and teaching their classes. Responses in this category were often very detailed and emphasized the precarity of students' lives. We discuss the responses that dealt with academic readiness and development separately.

Half of the excerpts in this data set within emotional labor focused on the issue of challenges students face. Marginalized and vulnerable students were the topic of many comments. "On top of all of this, because we work with so many students who are some of the most vulnerable students in the population in terms of preparation, social support, and systemic oppression, the emotional labor of being a community college is enormous," writes one respondent. Multiple respondents identified the material, social, and culture challenges faced by students:

- "Visiting with students in our offices for feedback or listening to students' incredibly complex and hard lives (poverty, childcare, abuse, addiction, working, etc)—all of that is taxing."
- "Every semester, I have students who fall behind because they are working multiple jobs with shifting schedules, who are one medical or transportation bill away from being unable to make ends meet, who simply believe they don't belong in college because so much is new or unfamiliar, who lack support at home because they are the first in their families to go to college, or who don't seek treatment for anxiety, depression, or other mental illness because of the cost, the stigma, or simply not knowing how."
- "The biggest issue is the emotional work that goes into managing so many students, who are in tenuous life positions. Students lose jobs, become homeless, struggle with addiction, have PTSD, and so much more. "
- "I have students facing issues like work-school schedule conflicts; consistent, safe childcare; consistent, safe elder care; food scarcity; the obstacles created by poverty; and the pressures of dual enrollment at local high schools."

Respondents in this category often used affirming and admiring language about helping students, often qualifying it with the cost of providing high levels of support. One respondent noted, for example, that "providing compassion and support for these students is absolutely necessary and often rewarding, but it's also exhausting when considering all of the other work I have to do." Another respondent said, "These students have demonstrated outstanding resilience; however, their situations require care, listening, and support as well as flexibility that can be quite draining on faculty."

Another respondent characterized this “give and take” of supporting their students and the struggle to reserve their energy for families: "The amount of time spent staying in touch with students who are having life crises, the mental load of keeping track of all of their unique circumstances so that I can try to be accommodating/encouraging and prevent them from dropping the class, and the amount of energy it takes to mentor so many students through their anxieties around writing, and then have to go home and still have energy for my kid."

Certainly existing research on academia in general speaks to what can be disciplinary and gender differences in terms of which faculty are more likely to take on emotional labor—those faculty in the humanities, white women and people of color, those who teach smaller-classes with intensive interaction between students and faculty. These research findings were echoed by our survey respondents. For example, one respondent noted, “I think maybe more students discuss personal matters with English instructors, especially women, which is a significant workload issue.” Further research on how this work is identified, recognized, valued, and allocated in two-year colleges is necessary. At least one respondent directly addressed the differences in student populations between community colleges and four-year universities, noting that the biggest workload shift was largely the increase in "...the labor of helping students in crisis. I moved from a 4-year college and helping student in crisis (small and large) have increased 400%."

**Emotional Labor and Student Readiness and Development:
(EL and Student Development: 18/193 codes, 26 excerpts/109; Student Readiness:
20/193 codes, 34/109 excerpts)**

Second, many comments, which we group into one category with two codes, focused on the academic readiness or lack of readiness they observed and the labor associated with helping students in their academic and writing development. This category included some subthemes, including advising, college literacy and management skills, and institutional navigation skills.

Multiple respondents described their advising and mentoring responsibilities as a significant part of their workload, in part because this work is part of their contractual obligation or because students are more likely to reach out to writing instructors because class sizes are usually smaller than in other disciplines (instructors can get to know their students better, and the writing process tends to involve a level of engagement and feedback allows for a more substantive relationship between teachers and students). Furthermore, the high percentage of two-year college students who are first-generation and working class students means that the responsibility for helping them navigate the unwritten rules and unfamiliar structures and bureaucracies of higher education becomes part of faculty workload. For example, one respondent wrote, "The amount of support we provide for life issues. The intensive academic advising. I have 30 advisees and meet with all of them." Another respondent identified the specific kind of work required by teachers in developmental or corequisite programs: "For developmental instructors, the inherent personal/emotional/experiential obstacles that our students often struggle with and against make teaching secondary at times. We have to help them navigate the educational landscape." Instructors can feel a responsibility to integrate elements of this ‘navigating the bureaucracy of higher education’ a part of their course instruction, or as additional, outside of class efforts.

Another respondent spoke about the confidence building they provide for ALP students: "The emotional workload is also harder when I teach Accelerated Learning Program classes. I have to spend so much of my time reassuring them. It is meaningful work, but I feel my colleagues in other departments do not understand how this adds to my general workload and stress level. I

often go home with little left to give to a social life." Other respondents described the need for teaching "student skills" like "time management and appropriate classroom behavior." Another respondent identified this as the "emotional labor of providing students with the institutional knowledge they need to succeed." Another theme included the different workload in two-year college English departments that is associated with what are called "Running Start" or dual credit courses, and managing both the classroom management and bureaucratic aspects of these early college programs. One respondent noted, for example, that "teaching a class that is sometimes over 50% high school students often means much more emotional work and many more emails about grades; additionally, the state requires absence reports 4 times a semester. Plus, managing a class of (often) less socially mature students is hard work." Our survey data suggest that issues related to student readiness and development have a significant impact on the emotional labor required of two-year college faculty and staff.

Emotional Labor and Material Conditions: (22 of 193 codes, 55 of 109 excerpts)

Third and finally, emotional labor overlapped with material conditions, but in ways that were somewhat surprisingly less focused on students and more on the working conditions of the respondents themselves or their colleagues. These responses fell into a few areas, including the emotional labor that surrounds working conditions, particularly the precarity of adjunct faculty, the emotional labor resulting from imposed reforms either from national or state-level groups, and low compensation or inadequate resources. A smaller theme included emotional labor resulting from uninformed or unsupportive colleagues resistant to composition initiatives.

Imposed outside reforms were noted by respondents who referenced initiatives from entities like Complete College America or the state of California and their recent AB 705 act which nearly eliminates developmental education in that state. As one survey response explained, "We teach more and more transfer-level composition because remedial education is shrinking - AB 705. Transfer composition has seven essays! Many of us teach multiple sections of transfer composition. It is brutal. There is no compensation for working hard and the emotional toll is sometimes overwhelming. We work to improve our students' lives through education, but we are not valued as professionals, we work so much and so hard, and we teach because we love it." Data gathered on the [Postsecondary Writing Course Caps](#) tracking sheet, which has collected information on over 400 institutions, includes 19 responding California community college course caps for their state-mandated corequisite models that move students previously in developmental education to an extended, degree-credit support model. The average number of students in a section across those 19 campuses is 28.8, with a low of 24 and a high of 40 at a Los Angeles community college. It is easy to see how the emotional labor, assessment, and feedback workload of 30–40 students in a single section—or as many as 150–200 students across an instructor's workload, can challenge even the most dedicated instructor to meet the needs of their students.

Another respondent linked the theme of challenges students are facing with the consequences of imposed reforms: "The amount of changing/revising that happens due to initiatives from outside entities; for example, Complete College America and state legislators who seek to limit curriculum for underprepared students. For developmental instructors, the inherent personal/emotional/experiential obstacles that our students often struggle with and against make teaching secondary at times."

Others noted the inability to unionize as a stressor, as well as related workforce reductions resulting from minimal or no collective agency on the part of faculty to control their working conditions. One respondent noted, for example, that

Our college is undergoing a “reduction in force” meaning we're firing faculty who have had implied tenure for years. People sobbing in the hallways, in constant fear of an opaque process that might leave us without jobs. I'd say the simultaneous insecurity of our jobs coupled with the immense and always increasing workload (which for me, including service and scholarship) averages to be around 6 10-hour workdays a week during the semester (60hrs/week).

Related to overall material conditions of work and the compensation and security of the work is adjunct labor and how faculty working under these conditions themselves face stress because of a lack of stability. Another variable mentioned in this cohort of responses was the additional labor of managing part-time/contingent faculty:

- "The stigma of a full-time v. part-time faculty has got to end. Either hire everyone part-time and become an Uber economy (not my recommendation) or higher more full-time and implement a pathway to full-time to ensure quality."
- "The stress that having so many adjunct professors have on the department as a whole. It makes assessment hard, we don't have the authority to offer them more money, and there are constant changes and issues arising with workloads or folks leaving for full time work."
- "The stress of taking on multiple jobs for adjuncts who cannot make enough to support themselves."

The compensation structure, lack of employment security, heavy number of courses and students taught, provisional and changing relationship between part-time/contingent instructors, larger structures of the department required to manage placement, curriculum, and assessment, and the precarious employment model now ascendant in America create added emotional work for two-year college English faculty.

Conclusions and Implications

Our survey data suggest that emotional labor is a significant—but largely invisible and usually unacknowledged—aspect of the two-year college teacher’s workload. While respondents shared their experiences in order to shed light on invisible and unacknowledged aspects of their workload, instructor attitudes regarding emotional labor were clear. Many student challenges exist independently of writing classrooms; however, these challenges impact students' work within the classroom. Often, teachers’ emotional labor is a key part of this work.

The analysis of survey responses suggest that this emotional workload exists because instructors appear to hold a deep concern and compassion for their students. Respondents to our survey appeared to care deeply about the challenges students face and their material conditions. Respondents in this cohort clearly regarded helping students navigate the many difficulties of attending college and earning a degree as an essential part of their work as two-year college English teachers. Although these challenges exist independently from the two-year college English classroom, instructors in this cohort engaged this emotional work enthusiastically.

The workload picture provided by the TYCA Workload Survey illustrates a set of complex and demanding tasks at the two-year college, with multiplying emotional demands on teachers. The Harvard Business Review Press has recently issued an entire series of books on the subject of emotional intelligence, including such titles as *Empathy*, *Authentic Leadership*, and *Mindful Listening*. This work, along with our survey data, suggests the subject of emotional labor deserves careful attention in our research and scholarship. At the moment, this appears to be a

significant research gap in our understanding of the nature of teaching English at the two-year college.

Works Cited

- Brackett, Marc. *Permission to Feel: The Power of Emotional intelligence to Achieve Well-Being and Success*. Celadon: 2019.
- Caruso, David R., and Peter Salovey. *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager: How to Develop and Use the Four Key Emotional Skills of Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Costa, Karen. "Women's Emotional Labor in Higher Ed and the COVID-19 Crisis." *Women in Higher Education*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.wihe.com/article-details/147/women-s-emotional-labor-in-higher-ed-and-the-covid-19-crisis/>.
- Flaherty, Colleen. "Dancing Backwards in High Heels': Study Finds Female Professors Experience More Work Demands and Special Favor Requests." *InsideHigherEd*, 10 Jan. 2018. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/10/study-finds-female-professors-experience-more-work-demands-and-special-favor>.
- Harvard Business Review Press. *Authentic Leadership*. Cambridge, 2017.
- . *Empathy*. Cambridge, 2017.
- . *Mindful Listening*. Cambridge, 2019.
- Hochschild, Arlie. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Jimenez, Miguel F., Theresa M. Laverty, Sara P. Bombaci, Kate Wilkins, Drew E. Bennett, and Liba Pejchar. "Underrepresented Faculty Play a Disproportionate Role in Advancing Diversity and Inclusion." *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, June 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-0911-5>.
- June, Audrey Williams. 2018. "Professors Are the Likeliest Mentors for Students, Except Those Who Aren't White." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 October 2018. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Professors-Are-the-Likeliest/244955>.
- Lindquist, Julie. "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy." *College English*, vol. 67, no. 2, Nov. 2004, pp. 187–2009.
- Micciche, Laura. "More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work." *College English* vol. 64, no. 4, 2002, pp. 432–458.
- . "Staying with Emotion." *Composition Forum* vol. 34, Summer 2016. <http://compositionforum.com/issue/34/micciche-retrospective.php>
- Payne, Michelle. "Administration, Emotional Labor, and Gendered Discourses of Power: A Feminist Chair's Mission to Make Service Matter." *Peitho: The Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*, vol. 21, no. 2, Spring 2019, pp. 279–307.
- Sechelski, Amanda and Chelsea Story. "So This Is Why I'm Exhausted: Emotional Labor Explained." *NACADA Today: Academic Advising Today*, vol. 40, no. 3, Sept. 2020. <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/So-This-Is-Why-Im-Exhausted-Emotional-Labor-Explained.aspx>.
- Shayne, Julie. "Recognizing Emotional Labor in Academe," *Inside Higher Ed*, 15 September 2017. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/09/15/importance-recognizing-faculty-their-emotional-support-students-essay>.

For More Information

For more information about the TYCA workload project and additional reports, see <https://ncte.org/groups/tyca/tyca-position-statements/>.