Express Yourself: Using Empathy to Create Better Assessments

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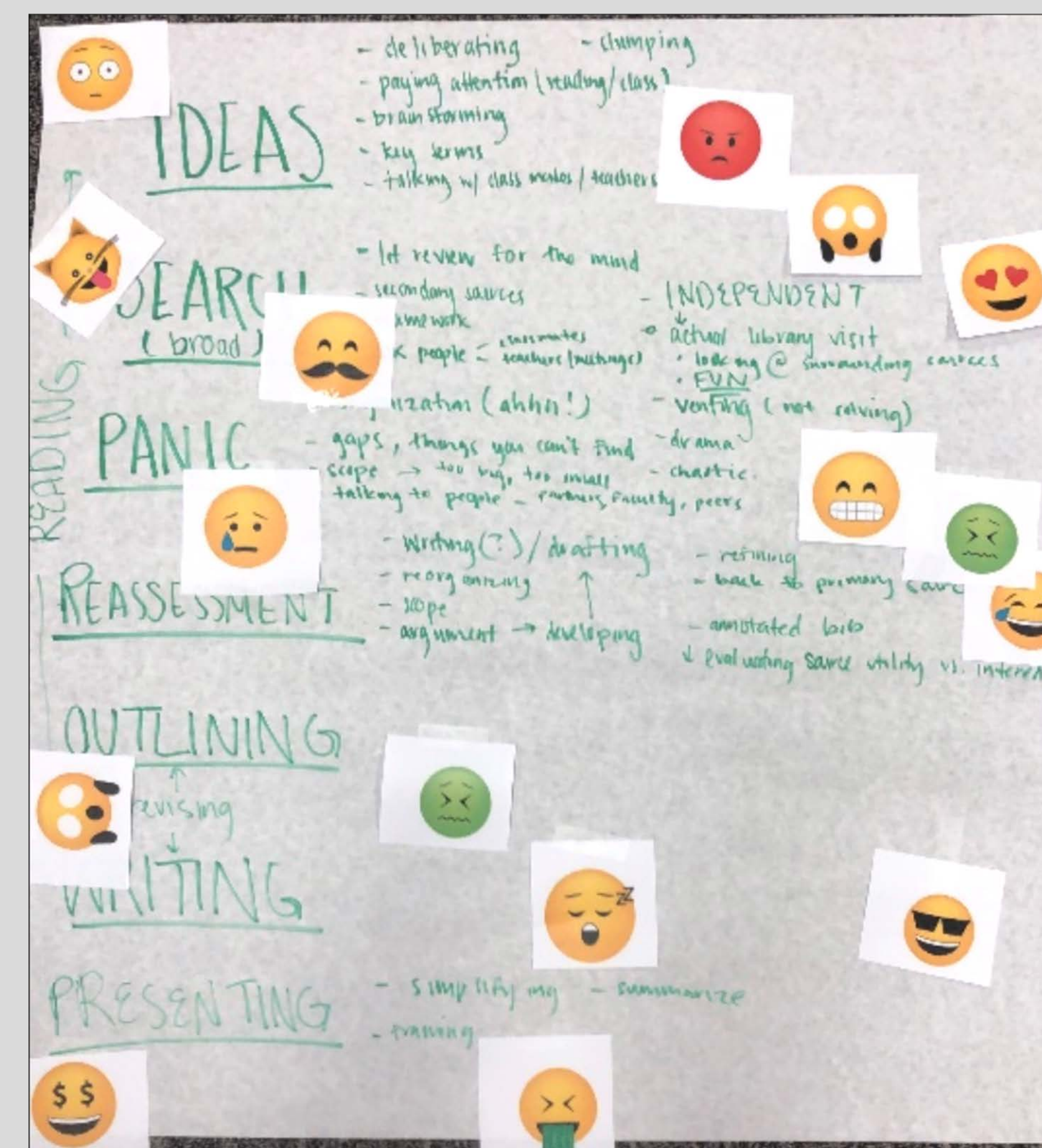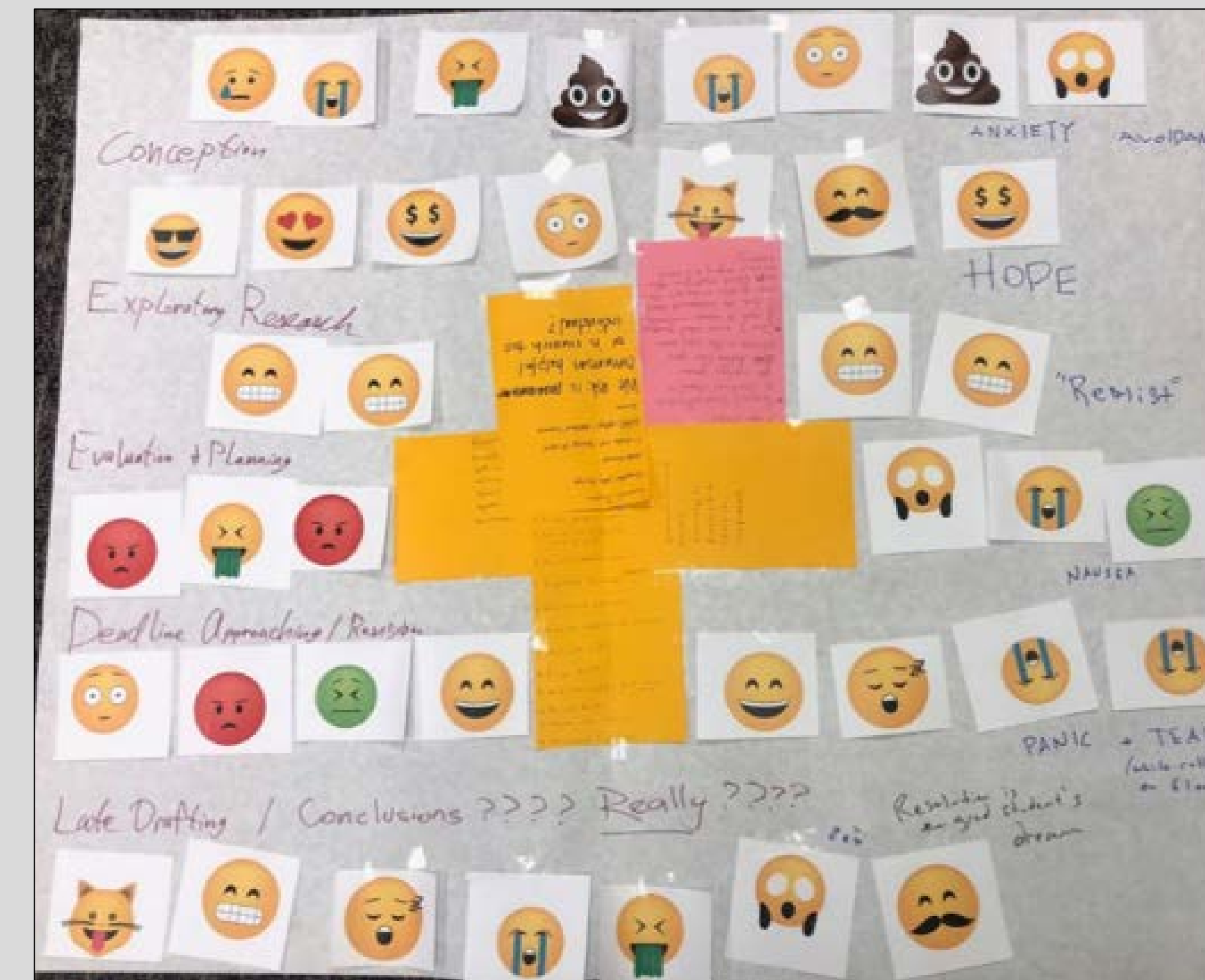
Background

- In Spring 2018, Erin ran a workshop with students in a capstone course that asked them to get into small groups and use emojis to map out their feelings during the research process, in order to better understand their personal barriers to learning. A faculty member present at this workshop suggested that it would be useful to run with instructors, as they often forget what their students are going through.

- This "forgetfulness" was noted during a workshop that librarians run each year with new English composition instructors. Librarians found that their proposed assignments often went beyond what we felt was appropriate for the students' learning level.

- Rather than "telling" them, we wanted them to better understand for themselves what their students might be experiencing when trying to learn new research skills, so we ran this same workshop with both new and experienced composition instructors.

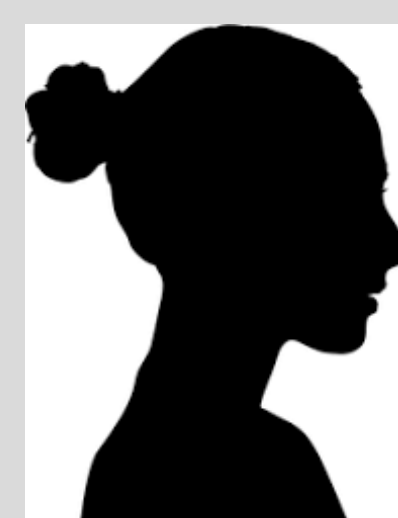## Methods and Results (So Far)

Workshop and Participants

A workshop was held with the English Department's "Professional Development Course," which includes all English composition instructors, both new and seasoned. The workshop presented a background on library anxiety and then asked participants to get into small groups to try to map out the research process. Then, attendees were asked to utilize pre-printed emojis to express their feelings at each stage. There were 30 total participants in the workshop: 20 seasoned instructors that have taught English composition for at least one academic year, and 10 that will teach it for the first time this coming Spring semester. Of the 30 participants, 19 agreed to participate in the interview questions: 14 women and 5 men, including 11 seasoned instructors and 9 instructors with no prior former teaching experience.
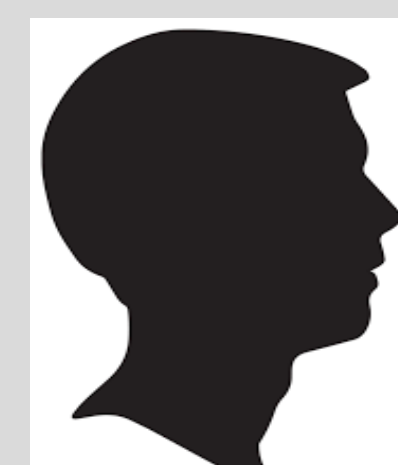
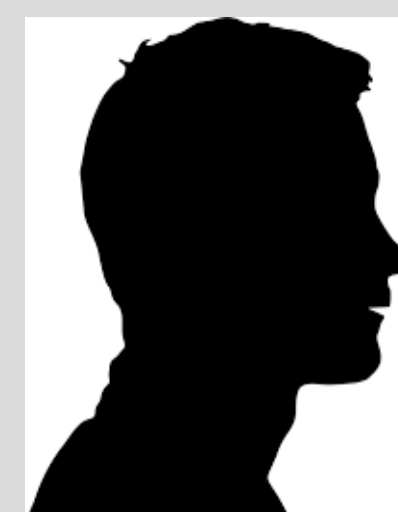### Select Interview Responses

Previous to this workshop, had you ever taken into consideration where your students may be struggling in the research process? Has the workshop changed your attitude toward their research anxieties and experiences?

> After our workshop, I realized how much I share the same anxieties and struggles as my students do and perhaps expressing that to them, along with strategies to conquer the process, would be helpful to them.
>
> --Woman, Seasoned Instructor

Reflecting on the workshop, what might you change about your future assignments?

> I want to try to frame an understanding of the purpose for doing things first before any assignment…I want to build in readings and conversations about why we do research, what makes "quality" research, etc.
>
> --Man, New Instructor

Did you discover any feelings that surprised you? How might this impact your course design and also how you interact with students?

> I was surprised to find that my own feelings about research work were the opposite of many of my peers. It will be good for me to be aware of other perspectives on the project, particularly the feeling of being overwhelmed. I'll do my best to break the project into smaller, more easily completed parts.
>
> --Man, New Instructor

Do you think that your own anxieties OR favorite parts of research come into play when designing your course (e.g. assignments, lectures, etc.)? How might this bias be detrimental to student learning?

> I have a colleague who likes to say "You have to teach the students you have - not the student you were, the students you used to have, or the students you'd like to have" - this was a good reminder of a new place to consider this advice.
>
> --Woman, Seasoned Instructor

Would you be interested in, or are you now planning to, incorporate a workshop like this into your own classroom to see where your students may be struggling?

> I would maybe have this be a midterm type in-class exploration to help students express their frustrations as well as strengths, and give me some more ideas about what we need from our library sessions.
>
> --Woman, Seasoned Instructor

Completed Research Maps

A Few Takeaways

Overall, the workshop was well-received and there were numerous positive comments, both during and after. Many workshop participants plan to incorporate more reflection and discussion about research into their class design. A few of the participants have already done this workshop with their classes this semester and students found it helpful to decompress; others plan to incorporate the workshop into future classes.

Although many participants had considered students' emotions in developing their course and assignments, this workshop made them more aware of how students may struggle at different stages of research. Upon reflection, many of the participants did not realize how their peers may be struggling with different aspects of research; for example, a few had not considered topic selection to be a difficult part of research. Also notable is that many of the instructors had not realized how different their peers' research interests were from their own.

Implications and Future Directions

Why Librarians?

- Public services and instructional librarians are in a unique position on campus because they help students with research across disciplines, identities, and statuses in school.

- We notice patterns between their developmental stage and their feelings and anxieties regarding research; and because we do not grade students, we become a sounding board for their frustrations with course projects.

- Because of this, we can be a valuable resource in terms of advocating for student needs on a more affective or emotional level.

Implications and the Future

Implications for assessment:
Librarians can use their first-hand experience with student emotions and anxieties to help instructors create assessments that more holistically take into account the learnings styles, research anxieties, and developmental levels of their students. Allowing instructors to reflect on their own emotions in the research process can raise awareness that the "one size fits all" approach to assignments must also take into account a multitude of other factors.

Future plans and directions:
- Continue analyzing interview responses and look more closely at how this might impact instructors based on experience.
- Interview participants to discover how this impacted their actual assignments and interactions with their students.
- Pay more attention to the conversations that workshop participants are having during group time, with less focus on the final poster that groups create. It is important to arrange participants into small groups rather than having them work individually so that negotiation and learning comes from others.
- Develop a workshop that can be easily tailored and used across the library profession and in other disciplines.