Sharing is Caring: Empowering Voice and Engaging Library Staff During the Pandemic

Susanna M. Cowan
University of Connecticut, USA

The Argument

This paper examines a series of "intentional" inward-focused assessments conducted at the UConn Library at various points during the first year and a half of the pandemic. I might also describe these assessments as "ClimateQUAL-informed," as the methodology of that survey and its findings were fresh in our minds as we entered lockdown in March 2020. The argument I offer here is that these assessments, all focused on how staff were working (and working through) the pandemic and its effect on their work amount to a kind of empowerment of library staff. As I will discuss further, the idea of empowerment in general and empowerment through assessment specifically are complex concepts. However, I suggest that, given the context of the pandemic, "empowerment" has to be evaluated relative to the unique (and we hope never to be repeated) environment of wholly remote work and the resulting hybridity that defines the current default work mode for the majority of our library staff. Although I discuss four distinct studies below, this paper is focused more on the aggregate force of these assessments than what we learned from each. However, I have tried to offer enough by way of method and findings for each to make its impact evident.

Context

From March 2020 through summer 2021, the majority of staff at the University of Connecticut Library (comprising most of the main Storrs campus libraries and the four regional campus libraries) worked wholly remote schedules. For the subsequent 2021–22 academic year, staff worked mostly hybrid schedules resulting in, on a typical day, only some fraction of staff being onsite concurrently, a mode that has continued up to the present (November 2022). As at many academic libraries, work in 2020 starting in mid-March and carrying through the bulk of 2021, was mainly accomplished[1] through virtual interaction launched from a wide array of offsite home offices or de facto (improvised, sometimes shifting) workspaces. Although our Library staff during this period had a variety of means for collaborating and communicating in both formal and informal ways—from WebEx and Teams to Slack, Miro boards and more—gauging the experience of the pandemic along both work-professional and home-lived-experiential axes was anecdotal more than intentional in the initial months.

Library staff were a constant topic of discussion and occasion for action in the first year of the pandemic, as administration considered their safety and the logistics of working

remotely. However, for all that staff were a constant focus of discussion and decision, it was primarily in the context of logistics: equipment, purchasing, vaccinations & testing, HR telecommuting rules, etc. These logistical considerations were of paramount concern generally speaking, as the Library focused its attention on the myriad decisions that had to be made and enacted across physical spaces, workflows, and policies. This was made challenging by the constantly changing nature of directives from University, state, and federal offices and agencies.

So it's not surprising that it took us a little over a year to return to some of the questions that had emerged from ClimateQUAL, which we had run in late 2019 and only just finished analyzing in spring 2020—just in time to take a back seat to a world health crisis. By spring-summer 2021, most staff had settled into working from home. The approach of the fall 2021 semester and the first return to campus for many staff created an opening to return to some questions that had emerged during the pandemic—and which in some cases added urgency to digging deeper into areas of concern underscored in our ClimateQUAL findings.

The pandemic had us wondering the simple (and human): How is everyone doing out there? But we also wondered: "How is collaboration going?," "How well are we connecting to each other and stakeholders," "How engaged are staff as this continues," and "how successfully are things getting done?" Drawing from ClimateQUAL areas of concern, we further wondered: "How are Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace" and "Organizational Withdrawal" being exacerbated by remote and sometimes isolating work situations? To what extent was our commitment to teamwork sustaining us—or were perceptions around the "structural facilitation" of teamwork hindering us in this challenging environment? And where were we in further investigating and invigorating work in support of justice, equity, diversity, access, and inclusion?

Starting to Ask Questions

The four assessments I'll discuss here occurred during a condensed period of time, from late summer 2021 to early winter 2022. They were not exactly in sequence—in fact, several overlapped with each other—but they were, much as ClimateQUAL and our Strategic Framework process had been (the topic of a 2020 paper!) mutually-informing.

As well as informing each other, all four drew directly from our experience of running ClimateQUAL. We continued to respond to ClimateQUAL in two ways throughout this period: in *what* questions we asked staff and in *how* we asked questions of our staff. ClimateQUAL focuses an organization's attention of areas of strength and concern, but it's also significant that the methodology of ClimateQUAL, specifically in how it is presented to staff, can have a powerful impact. We took our time configuring ClimateQUAL. We took the process of educating staff in its design also as an

opportunity to respond to staff concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and data security. When we shared the results of the survey, we offered staff not only a summary of the survey findings as we read them, but also the complete statistical report from ARL, including all but a single textual comment, redacted to protect a staff person's identity.

It would be a misrepresentation of the four surveys I'll discuss to suggest they were *by design* a cumulative attempt to give voice to our staff during the pandemic, but it would be accurate to say that, as each assessment was designed, that opening up opportunities for staff voice was of first and foremost concern. The cumulative force of these assessments was something that emerged over time.

How's Work-Life Going? (July 2021)

The first staff-focused assessment was an informal feedback mechanism I created in mid-summer 2021 at the behest of the ad hoc Staff Experience Working Group, which had been established in response to the pandemic. Truly rudimentary, the mechanism was nothing more than an empty spreadsheet with four columns, headed by theses prompts: (1) Best things about working remotely; (2) Worst things about working remotely; (3) Any concerns about fall "re-entry?"; (4) Anything else staff would like the Staff Experience Workgroup to know? It functioned as a kind of survey—with the intermediary step of running through a poll-like interface (Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, etc.) stripped away. In fact, it functioned like a survey if the results were always on view—to everyone. Staff were invited to fill in cells themselves or on behalf of others (for example, we said supervisors were welcome to input anonymously comments generated in conversations within their units/areas).

As our assessment librarian, it was the first real taste I had of how much staff were looking for opportunities to share their experiences with the organization broadly. Most staff interaction during the period of remote work had been at a functional level— with unit, area, and other team colleagues. Although certainly "how are you doing?" conversations had been happening between individuals and among groups starting in March 2020, we hadn't for reasons I describe above said: ok, *everyone—how's it going?*

Although I couldn't say for sure how many *individuals* responded (again, people were invited to share non-verbatim comments on behalf of others—or even group comments made by several people), 45 rows in the spreadsheet were filled—which was nearly half the number of staff at the time. Looking at the data, I experienced it as an explosion of voices. Having worked for a year "in my corner" (and I think I wasn't alone in this), it was like suddenly seeing the shape of the whole organization and the people in it for the first time in a long time.

We hadn't promised anything when we solicited this feedback, but when I viewed the data, it seemed to deserve a fuller response than just "thanks for the information."

Keeping in the spirit of the rudimentary mechanism, I quickly did a rudimentary thematic analysis of the comments, using a few quickly curated themes, like "Work-Life Balance," "C19-Safety-Logistics," "Work-Performance" and "Work-CommunityCulture." I added to these a + or – to capture positive and negative comments (and +/– for mixed thumbs up/down feedback) and created a quick report, which I disseminated to all staff. In the report, I broke the data out by each column prompt (e.g., best things about working remotely) and shared how I'd roughly coded the comments. For example:

Better **pollution** control due to **less traveling** on the road	+ Work-Life-Balance
Better **time management**	+ Work-Flex-TimeMgmt + Work-Performance

I followed each of these tabular thematically-grouped code sheets with a "by the number" summary of how many times each code had appeared—and what I called a "Narrative (Susanna's summation)," which I emphasized attempted to summarize without over-interpreting. Here are the "summary" codes and narrative summary that followed the "worst things about working remotely" coded responses:

Summary — by the numbers (using Susanna's "themes")

- Work-ModeMeans: 28
- Work-CommunityCulture: 21
- Work-Equity: 7
- Work-UnivCommunity: 5
- Work-Flex-TimeMgmt: 1
- Work-Performance: 1
- Work-Life-Balance: 1

Narrative (Susanna's summation)

The methods, and logistics, and function, and other limitations of online meeting and other technology were the most mentioned "worst thing" about remote work. Second to that was a concern that remote work decreased communication (and access to communication) with colleagues (e.g., the decrease in serendipitous chats and the increase in disconnection). Related to that (sometimes overlapping), a significant number of staff either worried about the impact of remote work on the organizational community/culture, some identifying also negative organizational behaviors that seemed worse (e.g., decreased accountability or decisions made with limited input.) Also closely related, some staff mentioned equity issues they perceived such as concerns about fairness, the non-inclusion of or connection to new staff, and the unevenness of participation and what we could call "voice" in virtual meetings. A few staff expressed concern about remote work in relation to the broader University Community, either due to decreased connection or, as one staff person noted, because

it was difficult to successfully communicate outside the library. Very few staff expressed negative thoughts about remote work in relation to productivity/performance or time management, although a staff member noted that collaboration time seemed diminished. A single staff member expressed that the work-life balance was upended, not by the workplace, but by the distractions of home and family.

The Working Group received positive feedback for both asking the questions and sharing (even roughly) the responses. It seemed that staff were eager—and their responsiveness supported this—to share how work (and life) was going a year-plus into the pandemic.

How Did the Fall Go? (November 2021)

This informal information gathering tool was followed by a formal survey given to all staff late fall semester to assess how well the first semester of the "return to work" had gone—a period that for most staff comprised hybrid work schedules. Requested by the Library's Senior Leadership Team, the survey was initially intended to focus on productivity—a way of proactively measuring the effectiveness of hybrid schedules to have data ready for the Provost and University administration.

I and the Associate Dean Lauren Slingluff (my direct supervisor) were tasked with this work, and we quickly agreed that a survey on "productivity" was not going to elicit constructive feedback—or seem particularly sensitive to the lived life-work experience of an ongoing pandemic. As we shaped the survey, we instead drew on the success of the earlier informal tool—and thought back to ClimateQUAL, both to the responsiveness of our staff (over 70% responded) and to what we guessed were still areas of concern, including Organizational Withdrawal and Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace.

We decided to craft a survey that would measure the *period* of what the University was calling "Alternative Work Arrangements" (AWAs, or hybrid schedules) without making the survey comprise exclusively on "HR" sounding questions. So, we cast the net more broadly, asking staff to consider their work in the fall across "areas of work critical to both individual and organizational" wellbeing: communication, productivity, engagement, and collaboration/work relationships.

We decided also to be as transparent as possible, prefacing the survey with a long explanation of the purpose and intended use of the data—and allowing all staff to click through all parts of the survey, including the parallel set of questions that only supervisors would ask (this was a requisite element of the survey, per the leadership group). As participants moved through the "supervisor" portion of the survey, they had the option at the end of each page to indicate they were ready to go to the last question (i.e., finish the survey) or choose "No thanks, I'm still checking things out." (The

subset of staff who viewed the supervisor section were about split in viewing every question or viewing some questions, then going to the end.) As our colleagues entered the survey, a full page of introductory text laid out the who, what, why (and whereto) of the survey. From the survey introduction:

> Having experienced, not just one but multiple shifts in our way of working, it makes sense now to pause and reflect on this latest transition so that we may reinforce what has gone well and bolster what needs further support. The goal of this survey is to offer staff the chance to assess themselves how the fall semester went. For many (but not all) staff, this period included some form of Alternative Work Arrangement (AWA). For all staff, it was a period of adjustment. This survey considers four areas of work critical to both individual and organizational wellbeing: communication, productivity, engagement, and collaboration/work relationships.
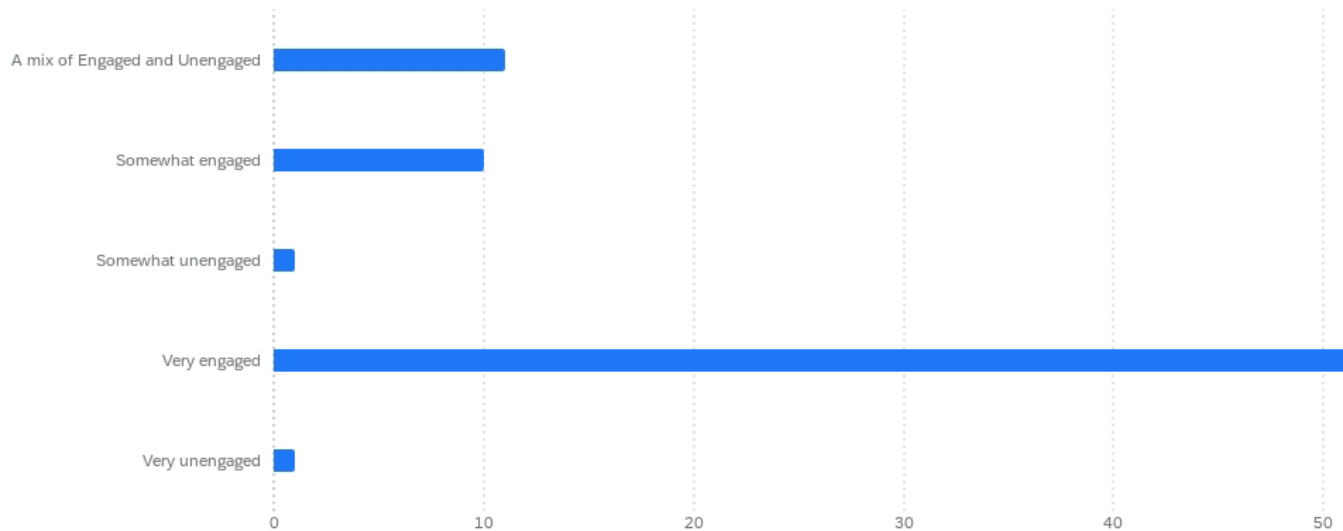
> This survey is not intended as a referendum on whether AWAs are viable. This survey is directed at our entire community (regardless of AWA status) and is intended to offer us insight into how this period of adjustment went so that we may be responsive as an organization. How you answer each question is entirely up to you! As with the feedback the Staff Experience Working Group solicited from staff this summer, your responses will help us tell the story of how we're doing in this time of return, but also continued change and disruption. We appreciate your honesty and self-reflection!

> A note about intent: We are likely to continue in a range of work locations and modes this spring; beyond that, we must of course wait for the University's determination about summer and fall 2022. Although the Library cannot dictate the outcome of those future decisions, we do plan to share with the Provost and University administration the results of this self-study with the hope that it will be a model for how a cycle of transition, reflection, and improvement can ensure we are meeting organizational goals while remaining fluid as a workforce.
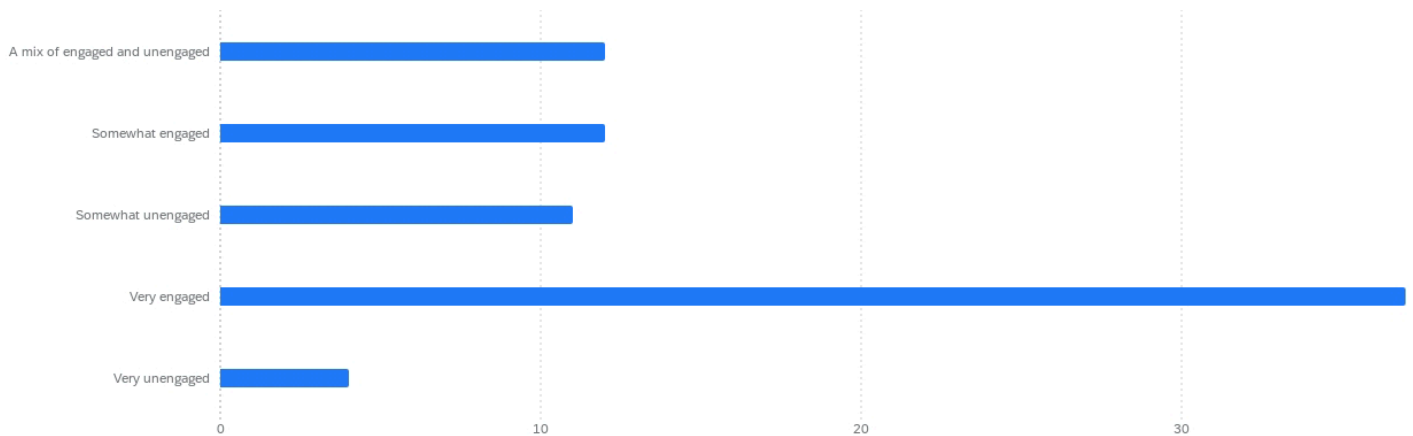
Again, the response to asking questions was strong. Nearly 80 out of our approximately 100 staff members answered the survey, and they submitted 317 individual comments in response to the survey's several open-ended questions. Focusing on those write-in comments, our initial summary of the survey was shared via email and focused on trends we'd picked up in our thematic analysis of these comments. Attached to that email was a Qualtrics-generated report showing all scale/multiple choice responses. Our final analysis added a summary of those numeric scales.

Sample of scale responses:

9. How engaged with your work were you during this period? `76` ⓘ

A mix of Engaged and Unengaged	
Somewhat engaged	
Somewhat unengaged	
Very engaged	
Very unengaged	

(horizontal axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

10. How engaged with the organization (the Library) were you during this period? `76` ⓘ

A mix of engaged and unengaged	
Somewhat engaged	
Somewhat unengaged	
Very engaged	
Very unengaged	

(horizontal axis: 0, 10, 20, 30)

Sample of thematic summary:

The Organization

- There was expressed concern from some staff about the perceived lack of equity between hybrid/remote and mostly on-site schedules.
- There were concerns about some supervisors' responsiveness (e.g., frequency of meetings, availability).

- Some staff shared concerns about a perceived lack of vision and strategic direction from leadership, which for some were tied to feelings of disengagement.
- A frequently recurring theme was that virtual meetings had improved inclusion of Regional Campus Library staff.

What's Up with Teams and Teaming? (Fall 2021/Winter 2022)

Simultaneously with the survey on Alternative Work Arrangements, the library team comprising all mid-level managers (the Dean's Library Council) was in the midst of a year-long investigation of ClimateQUAL results. The group had been tasked with further studying that survey's findings with the goal of reporting back to Library leadership with some concrete recommendations. After several months working with the data and finding consensus around a point of focus, the group moved ahead with an investigation of "Teams and Teamwork." This focus drew on the fact that teams/teamwork were, according to ClimateQUAL data, both a core strength (belief in teams, the relationship between team members and team leaders) and a core challenge (psychological empowerment of teams). Through conversation as we defined our project plan emerged a belief that an investigation of teams and teamwork would elicit responses helpful in better understanding other "low" scores in Organizational Withdrawal and Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace.

This investigation took the form of a series of online conversations, facilitated by members of DLC, who also acted as note-takers (given our organizational climate, and the added stresses of the pandemic, we strongly felt that recording these conversations would be counter-productive). Although unintentional, these conversations were complementary to the AWA survey, as they further expanded our understanding of how staff were (and weren't thriving) and in particular what mechanisms supported (or obstructed) their work.

Although not required to have an IRB protocol (as it was an internal study), we intentionally adhered to principles of human subjects research in prioritizing confidentiality and transparency in our design of the conversations and our dissemination of results. The final document the group produced both summarized our findings (based on a group thematic analysis of the notes we'd taken—that is, an analysis of the paraphrased comments shared during the conversations) and made recommendations to senior leadership. We prefaced our remarks with a statement about the value of a strong culture of teaming:

[Excerpt]

> Teams can be a powerful way to accomplish the work of the Library.
> Through shared leadership ("leading from every chair"), staff can
> collaborate via teams to determine best methods for achieving Library

objectives, create clear goals, work independently, use, and develop skills, be empowered to make and implement decisions, and take accountability for their work. When teams feel empowered, staff engagement rises, and work gets done. Again and again, staff told us that membership on such teams is both personally and professionally motivating and rewarding.

Sample of summary findings:

Overall, staff offered positive feedback during discussions, especially regarding the attributes of well-functioning teams. Generally, negative comments reflected examples of the adverse impact of teams missing one or more of these attributes (e.g., if clear roles are necessary to a positive experience, the absence of clear roles results in a negative experience). Dominant themes [that] emerged in analysis of the conversations we held with staff [included] the necessity of STRUCTURAL groundings for teamwork (e.g., norms, facilitation, role clarity, equitable division of labor), the positive or negative effect of ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE on teamwork (e.g., top-down team formation vs. empowering collaboration), and the importance of positive INTERPERSONAL interactions (e.g., teams that enact trust, respect, recognition of team members as both employees and people).

## What's the State of Library Services? (Winter 2022)

The slate of inward-facing assessments we ran over the course of a fairly condensed period finished with the only study run independently. With several colleagues, I understood a study approved by our Strategic Framework implementation group to assess how both work and "library service" had shifted and been affected by the pandemic. Hoping to capture the experience of a soon-to-be-forgotten period of time, the survey asked a range of questions about how library staff perceived the pandemic to have affected their day-to-day work and their ability to provide service and collaborate with different stakeholders, from traditional library patrons (students and faculty/instructors) to members of the public and non-UConn researchers. There were no definitive trends in this data—although that might be itself identified as a trend: almost every question elicited the full range of positive-to-negative responses regarding impact on our staff's ability to connect with and provide service to stakeholders. Several findings were a bit unexpected, perhaps: the degree, for example, that staff perceived remote collaboration tools to have a positive or neutral impact on their ability to interact with faculty:

Figure 1: Impact of Remote Collaborative Tools on Interactions with UConn Faculty
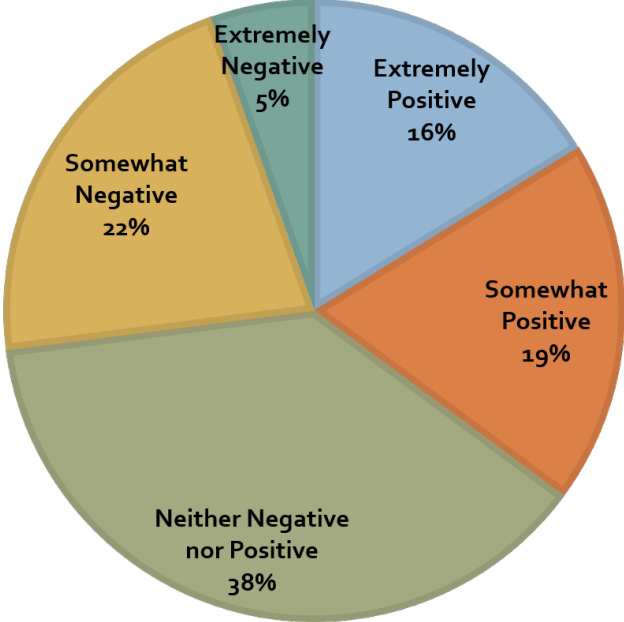
Even more surprising, perhaps, was the fact that this shifted in the direction of positive effect when considering undergraduates:

Figure 2: Impact of Remote Collaborative Tools on Interactions with UConn Undergraduates
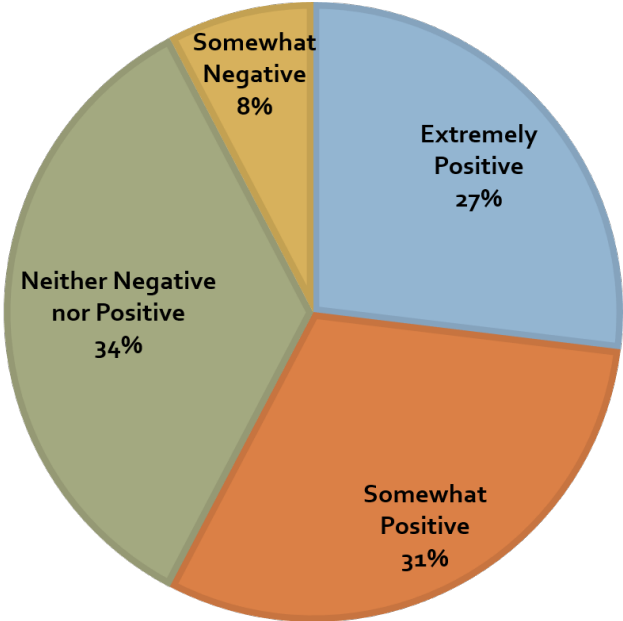
Does This Add Up to Empowerment?

Nothing so far has strongly made the case for "empowerment," although that is the suggestion I'm making in this paper. Empowerment—and specifically the cultivation of empowerment in social science participatory research methods—has a long history, dating back to the 1980s (see Christens 2012, for example). Price made the case (1990) that the focus on empowerment emerged from decades-old research and theory on empowerment in the social sciences converging with new attention in research to community-based movements and the idea of community-level empowerment. Since then, scholars have honed in on specific methods of social research that seem to empower groups and individuals. "Empowerment" in these discussions focuses on various interpersonal and interactional modes of being empowered—for instance emotionally or socio-politically.[2] Mostly, these empowering research methods cluster under the heading of "action research"—an approach to research that encompasses not only active participation of groups being studied, but opportunities for those groups to reflect on this participation and enact change in their environment. As one scholar puts it, "action research collaborates with the very people it seeks to study" (Berg 2004). More recently, researchers have aligned empowerment with very specific methods such as photovoice, a technique argued to offer both individual and community empowerment for disadvantaged group, for example vulnerable female populations (Coemans, Raymakers, Vandenabeele 2019).

In no way did any of the assessments of library staff we conducted during the pandemic amount to techniques as active as photovoice or the community-level participatory work discussed in by these scholars. However, what I will argue is that the pandemic dramatically changed the assessment landscape, particularly with regard to investigating our own staff. It would have been unthinkable to ask staff during the period of lockdown or even in the following period of still mostly remote work to document their experience using visual or other means that asked staff to make their private lives visible, however powerful such images might have been in capturing that period of our lives and work. To be clear, such techniques might have worked at other organizations, but our organizational climate was such that safeguarding psychological safety was paramount. While we worked through how organizational withdrawal and perceived lack of empowerment were still at work as we went through the pandemic as a community, each assessment we undertook was designed to encourage staff voice while minimizing risk. Although traditional "action research" was beyond our means during the pandemic, what we *could* do, and attempted to do in succession across several studies, was to say to staff: we hear you. How we could validate that we heard our colleagues was to ask meaningful questions with full disclosure of intent and share what we discovered with as much transparency as we could while still guarding confidentiality.

In aggregate, these four assessments became critical pieces of feeling our way forward through this period. What continued to be evident was that staff were willing, perhaps eager, to be offered opportunities to share their experience of and perspective on the pandemic as it was affecting their work and personal lived experience. In this sense, these assessments, which had functional intent, turned out to be powerful tools in giving space for individual voices to be heard by the whole organization in ways that pushed past the loose, informal exchanges in public forums like Slack. During a period of overall withdrawal, this engagement with questions about the workplace, work interaction, and the work itself, was striking.

Afterwards

What we learned about our organization, both through formal post-ClimateQUAL enquiry and in the process of discovering how to engage with and elicit response from our colleagues in the pandemic, continues to influence how we conduct library-wide assessments. Some initial conversations with staff about the how we approached internal studies during the pandemic indicate that staff noticed the intention. The assessments went beyond what was required to be ethical, a colleague who had collaborated on the AWA survey noted, and were also gentle and kind and supportive— were informed by empathy.[3] Another colleague, a member of DLC who collaborated on the teams & teamwork study, commented that for the first time we approached this kind of assessment as mutually-informing and generative, meaning that assessments weren't left "on the shelf" but were used as the springboard for other work, such as a non-pandemic-specific survey on the "culture of communication" in the library. We respected staff, a colleague commented, by being transparent and by acting on their feedback.

The experience of ClimateQUAL, and it's almost uncanny placement on the eve of the pandemic, uniquely prepared us to design as-needed assessment, particularly of library staff, during the pandemic. Regardless of specific feedback, our staff were eager to participate when invited to do so. In planning to run ClimateQUAL in late 2019, we had worked to reassure staff on its method and encourage them to participate—by being transparent and by making promises (about confidentiality, data curation, and communication of results) that we kept. The surveys and conversations we conducted over the months of the pandemic took these lessons from ClimateQUAL—methods were transparent, protection of participants was paramount, and findings were share as wholly as possible.

Although the "findings" of each instrument are valuable, and this paper will highlight some of them, the "finding" that may be most lasting is the degree to which we can use assessments to cultivate voice and engagement at a time when communication is literally channeled and constrained beyond our control. And whether or not this rises to the scholarly idea of empowerment as it is defined by researchers, given the

tremendous constraints on method imposed by both the pandemic and our own organizational challenges, there was a kind of tangible empowerment that emerged, even if it was by necessitated mostly in the form of making the voices of our staff visible.

It's unknowable whether things would have happened the same way if we hadn't run ClimateQUAL. What is clear is that ClimateQUAL was formative for our library, and every all-staff assessment implemented since has drawn on both principles in its design and findings specific to our organization. ClimateQUAL is a survey built to elicit often very personal experiences of an organizational culture in a manner that, in structure, content, and implementation, emphasizes care for privacy and personal autonomy. We launched ClimateQUAL in an organization that was suffering from rifts caused by distrust of leadership, feelings of disempowerment and resulting disengagement. Although the findings of ClimateQUAL showed those organizational characteristics to still exist as we entered the pandemic, we took those challenges head on when we began asking questions, with positive results.

Looking ahead, we now have to consider how we apply these lessons to *non*-staff-facing work. As many of the restrictions required by the pandemic disappear by policy and personal choice, the opportunity to engage with stakeholders in participatory and empowering ways is again feasible. We have just launched LibQUAL in our library. Clearly, a lengthy online survey is a world away from photovoice and other active research methods. But just as the long-form ClimateQUAL survey was a catalyst for meaningful self-reflection and learning, LibQUAL can be used (as it is intended, I believe), not as the final word in soliciting feedback from our students and faculty, but as a means of prioritizing the questions we will ask, I hope, many times and in many ways once the survey has concluded. Of critical importance, I think, is to pull from active research theory the idea that the groups we wish to hear from have a role to play, not only in answering our questions, but in deciding on those questions and how they are asked.

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Susanna Cowan
Coordinator for Library Research & Assessment
University of Connecticut

As the UConn Library's only assessment-dedicated staff member, Susanna guides or supports a wide range of both special projects and regular administrative assessment work, including statistics reporting for ARL/ACRL/IPEDS. She was the PI on the library's ClimateQUAL study in 2019–20 and is a co-lead on this year's LibQUAL study. A firm believer in assessment being everyone's job, she supports colleagues as

assessment collaborator, consultant, and general cheerleader. She is excited about co-launching a new COI for library assessment at UConn. Assessment for all!

Thank you!

Thanks to my colleagues at the UConn Library for their many words.

Endnotes

[1] This was true of the majority of our staff with some important exceptions. Access Services and a small set of staff started rotating back in by fall 2020 to support the reduced-onsite academic year, and buildings & grounds/security officers worked onsite throughout the pandemic. Additionally, our Pharmacy Library on the main campus, which reports to the School of Pharmacy administration, was staffed and open to patrons for most of this period.
[2] See Christens (2012) and also more recently Cavalieri, I. C. (2018).
[3] This and other comments are paraphrased, as this feedback hasn't yet been formalized. This feedback comes from a series of informal interviews conducted in summer and fall 2022.

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