

Supporting the 36%: A Teaching Guide on Student Mental Health in Media Archival Education

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In the summer of 2022, as part of my PhD dissertation (Marlatt 2024), I interviewed several alumni of moving image archival education programs about how accessible they felt their programs had been. These were students who identified as disabled, neurodivergent, or as having a chronic illness. While the students did not need to disclose any specific health condition as part of the interview or my research, mental health was brought up repeatedly, and while their experiences were not all negative, many felt that some part of their education had had a negative impact on their mental health.

Working in the field of media archiving has certainly had an impact on my own mental health. Elsewhere, I have discussed my experience as a film archivist with epilepsy (Marlatt 2022a). What I did not discuss in that initial article was my own experience with mental health. I am diagnosed with social anxiety disorder and depression, both of which are quite common for people with epilepsy. Between 30 and 50 percent of people with epilepsy have depression, and about 30 percent have social anxiety disorder, according to the International League Against Epilepsy (2019). Thankfully, my graduate school experience did not have as much of a negative impact on my mental health as others I have spoken to. What really did have a long-term impact on my mental health after graduation was interacting with films about epilepsy that related to aspects of my own experiences as a person with epilepsy. It was not even necessarily the content of the films that impacted me emotionally, but how they had been programmed, catalogued, and made available and accessible. I found it hard to separate my own experiences as a person with epilepsy and my role as an archivist caring for these materials. My experiences working, writing, and teaching in the field of moving image archives are certainly not separate nor isolated from my identity as

a disabled person.

In the 2021 Association of Moving Image Archivists' Salary and Demographics Survey, 36 percent of respondents shared that they had depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues (Marlatt 2022b). In 2021, the reported rate of mental illness was around 25 percent of the total population in both Canada and the United States, according to Statistics Canada (2023) and the National Institute of Mental Health (2023), respectively. The self-reported rate of media archivists' mental health issues is larger than those national averages. While further study would be needed to explain why media archivists reported a higher rate of mental health difficulties, there are things we can do to try to mitigate these difficulties as well as make the field more accessible for persons with mental health conditions. This starts with fostering a positive environment for students newly entering the field.

Knowledge mobilization—translating research into tangible action items—is critical when addressing mental health. This article is directed at educators and is purposely not framed as a scholarly essay. Instead, I aim to present a series of action items, recommendations, and general guidelines on how to further support students who may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health. Your course or program may not be able to address all the points presented below, but I encourage you to take some time to reflect on what is possible within your institution—you may be able to implement more of these suggestions than you initially think.

Be Proactive

With such a high rate of mental health issues reported across the field, it is all but guaranteed that there will be students in your courses who have had, or continue to have, difficulties with their mental health. Think of strategies that can best support the mental health of your students prior to requesting accommodations from your school's student accessibility services. In fact, speak to student accessibility services yourself, and try to learn more about some of the common concerns students currently face while in school. This may prove particularly important if your own graduation was not recent. Speaking with student accessibility services staff may also help them better understand what goes into teaching media archiving, and how they can best support you and your students.

Moving image archival education programs often require students to spend time offsite at different archival institutions, whether in the form of group site visits or some sort of individual internship for course credit. Speak to these archives ahead of time about being mindful of mental health concerns. Be aware of the type of collections students may be working with and address any concerns about accessibility with these archival institutions. Beyond mental health, this may include architectural barriers such as elevator access or physical tasks required of the student during the interview process. This is particularly important if any of your students have a disability or chronic illness that limits or interferes with their mobility. Being proactive about making the classroom and archive accessible for everyone ahead of time saves students from potentially having to disclose a medical condition when they are not comfortable doing so.

Be Upfront

It is imperative that we address specific challenges to archivists' mental health early in our students' education. This is not to deter them from pursuing the profession, but to help prepare them for their future work in archives. In media archives in particular, this means making students aware that they may eventually work with problematic content that is both graphic and emotionally challenging. Share the fact that processing collections can mean a heavy workload—and that the work is almost never complete. There is always more material to process than there is labour and funding to process it. Manage expectations by explaining to students what will likely be required of them when working in an archival space and be honest with them about salary ranges. While you may not be able to give a full and accurate representation of archivists' pay scale, perhaps go over recent job postings with students to give them a sense of what they can expect, and request that your peers post salaries on their job listings for the purpose of transparency.

Be Accommodating

Fostering a culture of care around mental health means being accommodating. Meeting deadlines is important, both in education and professionally, but as a mentor you can try to be flexible when possible. Demonstrating that you can be slightly lenient with deadlines ahead of time will make students more comfortable approaching you for an extension when they need it. This also benefits you, since if a student is scared to approach you about a deadline, they may leave their work to the last minute or miss the deadline altogether, making it difficult for you to plan ahead and keep the course on track. Being accommodating helps with course planning, creating accurate grading timelines, and a positive classroom space for students to feel comfortable participating in.

Formal accommodations approved by the university need to be followed, but try to also be open to accommodations even when they are not formally required by your school's student accessibility office. Graduate school is expensive, time-consuming, and stressful, which can have an impact on anyone's mental health. A student may not realize that they are experiencing any sort of difficulty with their mental health until they are well into their program. Healthcare can also be expensive, exclusionary, and slow, leading to delayed diagnoses. Informal accommodations may not always be possible, and when that is the case, you should be kind and explain why a certain accommodation may not work. Refrain from simply stating that "it would not be fair to the other students," as we all have different strengths and learn at a different pace.

The COVID pandemic made digital learning popular, and students may sometimes request to attend class via Zoom or another video-conferencing platform. While some remote classes are still offered, many institutions have returned to offering in-person instruction only, though some still allow exceptions for COVID-related reasons. Be mindful that immuno-compromised individuals' health may still be at risk not only due to COVID but also other viruses such as influenza. If you are not teaching a hands-on course, you may consider allowing a student to attend lectures

or discussions via video platform, when appropriate. This allows students to participate even if they need a mental health day or have a temporary injury or chronic illness that occasionally makes it painful to come to campus. Conferences should also continue to explore potential hybrid-attendance models for similar reasons.

While taking courses during my doctoral degree, I unexpectedly had to care for my sick wife. I was planning to drop one of my courses because I could not come to campus due to the risk of getting her sick and it leading to complications. The course director recommended that instead of dropping the course, I could attend virtually. This was pre-pandemic. Doing so not only kept me on track with degree requirements but also led to my own positive feelings about the program when it supported me as a student going through a very rough time.

Be Supportive

Disclosure of anything health-related can be intimidating. This can include a student disclosing a disability, chronic illness, neurodivergence, or their struggles with mental health. Be sure to take care when a student discloses something to you about their health and ask what you can do to support them. Also be sure to keep anything a student tells you in confidence private. The last thing you should do is to share their personal information with other faculty members or students.

You can also be supportive by informing students of existing media archival-related support initiatives, including career-related professional committees like the student chapters of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA). Getting to meet fellow students in different programs not only broadens students' networks but also helps foster a culture of community within the media archives field. We are, after all, quite a niche group. If your course is based at a North American university and it focuses on media preservation, there likely is already an AMIA student chapter at your school. If not, you could encourage your students to start one. If there is not enough interest or if that is not possible, you could at least inform students of AMIA's Education Committee. You could introduce this during the first class and include it on your syllabus as a reminder throughout the term.

Be Adaptable

Students have different learning styles. Being adaptable allows playing to their strengths. Students may be verbal learners or visual learners, so try to share instructions in both written and verbal form so that students can best process the information. If your course is more hands-on, you may consider altering how you have students present their work. Having the entire group watch a student physically handle material may make them feel intimidated, anxious, or uncomfortable, like they are performing in front of everyone. This is not generally how archives operate. If you have enough equipment, allow students to work at different stations and check in with each student one at a time. This allows students to work at their own pace without feeling like they need to perform.

Be Collaborative

If possible, offer multiple choices for collections that students can work with in your class. Not only does this allow students to follow their interests but it also helps students avoid being forced to work with material that they may find emotionally triggering, including material that is violent, sexual, or includes outdated and harmful stereotypes of marginalized communities.

Have conversations with your colleagues about mental health in the media archival profession. Bring awareness to the fact that mental health strategies need to be implemented into the field. Mental health awareness in the archival profession is something we all can and should collaborate on in some capacity. This could take the form of organizing a themed conference, hosting a one-time workshop, adjusting institutional policies, or guest editing a journal issue. Whatever shape these activities take, it is important to be receptive to students' ideas for mental health and wellness and to find ways for them to participate.

Universities often have evaluation surveys that students fill out after completing a course. Encourage and remind students to take these surveys, and welcome course feedback outside of formal course evaluations. Programs should also actively reach out to former students to learn about their experiences in the workplace and get a sense of what may have been missing from their education. Learn from this feedback and implement these recommendations within your course.

Be Familiar

Being up to date on literature that addresses mental health in the field will benefit you and your students. Try to include such material in assigned course readings and discussions throughout your course. Unfortunately, there is still very little written specifically about mental health and moving image archives. However, you can look to related work that advocates for inclusion and compassion in our field. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016) have written about the ethics of empathy in the archive. Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent (2021; Laurent and Wright 2023) provide reports on trauma-informed archival practice. Jennifer Douglas (2021) and her collaborators (Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell 2019; Douglas and Alisauskas 2021; Douglas et al. 2022) have also written about archival grief and the person-centred archive.

Be Aware

It is important to be aware of the mental toll that media archiving can take on an individual. Since the birth of the film medium there have been plenty of collections that include and display acts of violence, human rights violations, hate-filled material, and more. Our job in media archives is to visually inspect this material and to potentially examine it repeatedly, which re-exposes us to traumatic content. The damage can be worse when finding problematic material in a collection by accident or by not being warned in advance.

Learning media preservation best practices sometimes requires looking at examples in a classroom setting. Take some time to consider whether material you

are using to teach a course may end up emotionally triggering someone. Triggers are not voluntary and only cause further emotional harm for the student. If you are unsure, perhaps ask a colleague for insight. It is important to note that not all material that may emotionally trigger a student is obvious. Different people have different emotional triggers and much of this is based on personal experience. You will not be able to tell what everyone's emotional triggers are. Instead of trying to guess, inform students ahead of time about the content that will be used as a teaching aid. Warning students ahead of time allows them to prepare for the upcoming material or make the choice not to participate, without having to disclose any past trauma. You may also want to take this opportunity to talk about the concept of trauma as it relates to objects, collections, or entire media archives. This is where teaching students about trauma-informed archival practices proves particularly beneficial. You may consider getting a guest speaker who works with particularly difficult collections to speak to your students. These guest speakers can not only teach students how and why to preserve difficult content but can also provide first-hand insight about how to prepare and protect themselves emotionally when working with such difficult material.

Be Inclusive

Marginalized communities are reported to have higher rates of mental health difficulties. These rates climb when a person is a member of multiple marginalized communities. According to the 2020 AMIA Salary and Demographics survey (Real and Schneider 2021), the media archival field is predominantly white, cisgendered, and heterosexual. While the survey did find a higher representation of women in the field than men, there was a significant gender disparity that favoured men at the leadership level.

Those I spoke to as part of my research, who identified as part of one or more marginalized communities, were quite aware of their underrepresentation in the field and acknowledged that it impacted them emotionally. While inclusion efforts need to be increased archives-wide, there are ways to help students from different communities feel more welcome. Programs need to hire more faculty and administrative staff from underrepresented communities. Teachers could invite guest lecturers from these communities who may be willing to discuss their experiences and perspectives. I myself have hosted a couple of guest lectures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on moving image archival accessibility, and I have discussed my own experiences. I have found doing so to be quite rewarding.

All the strategies listed above present opportunities to help address the current state of mental health in the field of media archiving. Many of these recommendations can also be applied outside of the classroom and across all types of archival spaces. I have found that people in our field are well intentioned and want to support each other, and we can do so by creating an archival environment of care. Your students will appreciate it, and it may just help support those 36 percent.

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