

Academic Librarians' Conceptions and Experiences of Teacher Agency

2022 Concordia Research Symposium

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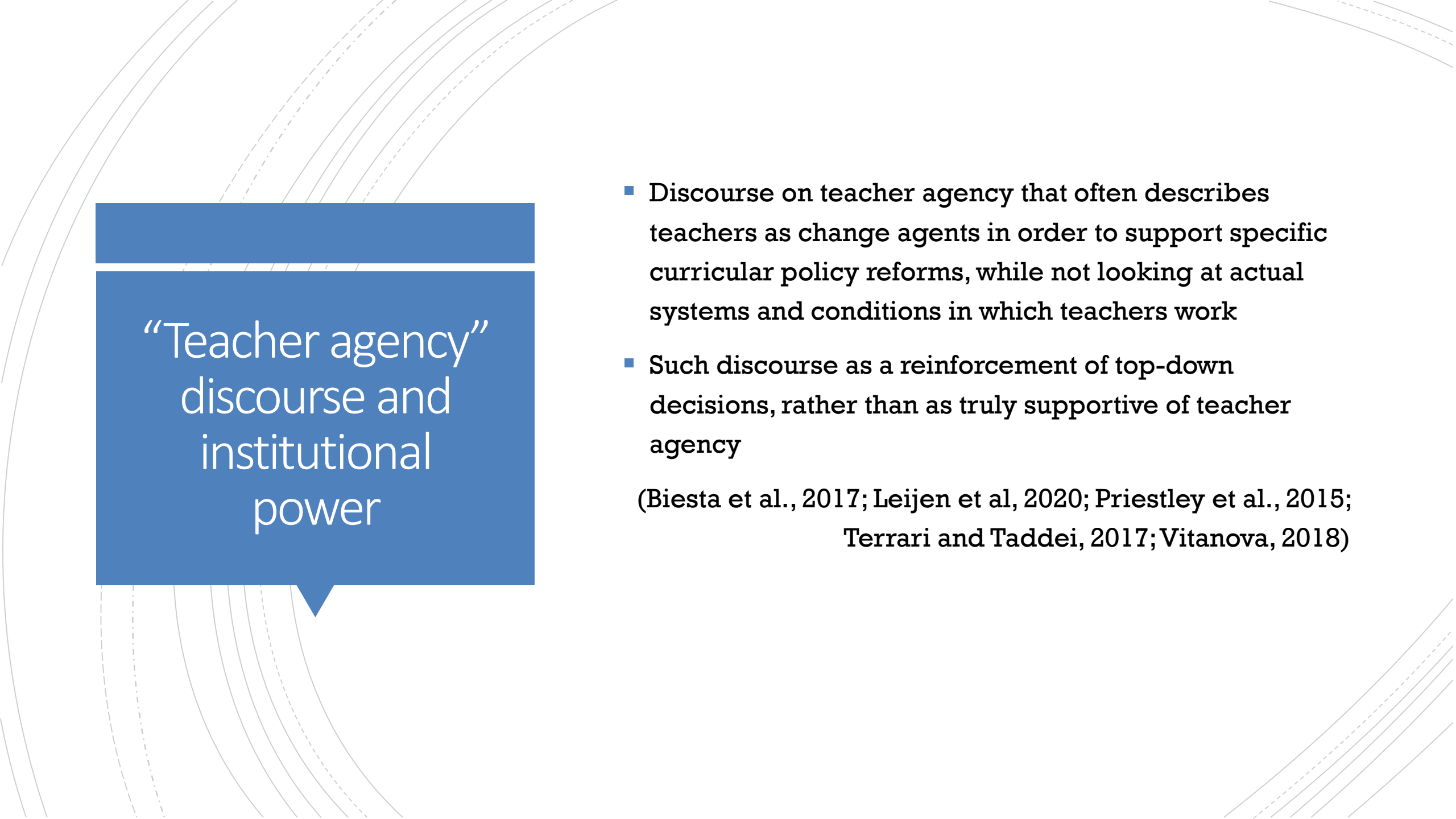
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Literature on Agency

What is agency?

- Essentially, the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in their surrounding environments
- In Western cultures, often described in terms of the individual
- In sociology and related fields, often discussed in relationship to/in tension with social/institutional structures (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hays, 1994)
- In psychology, related to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000)
 - intrinsic motivation as key to well-being
 - needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be met



“Teacher agency”
discourse and
institutional
power

- Discourse on teacher agency that often describes teachers as change agents in order to support specific curricular policy reforms, while not looking at actual systems and conditions in which teachers work
- Such discourse as a reinforcement of top-down decisions, rather than as truly supportive of teacher agency

(Biesta et al., 2017; Leijen et al, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015; Terrari and Taddei, 2017; Vitanova, 2018)

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An ecological model of agency

- Agency in relation to the various environmental factors in a given moment and context.
- “an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted”

(Priestley et al., “Teacher Agency: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?” 2015, p. 3)

Social structures and librarianship

- The traditional service model of librarianship and more recent calls for librarians to “prove their value”
- The gendering of librarianship, affective labor, and the devaluing of relational work (Sloniowski, 2016; Nicholson, 2019; Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2019)
- Institutional hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics
 - Faculty-librarian relationships
 - Library work and organizational culture (Meulemans & Carr, 2013; Ortega, 2017; Fobazi, 2018; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019)
 - The corporatization of higher education
 - Systems of power and privilege
- Evolving information environments and systems

Why talk about agency?

- Agency as the ability to act with choice and purpose in one's environment
- Key to sustained engagement in work that feels meaningful and worthwhile
- A lacking sense of agency as a strong contributor to burnout (Shupe and Pung, 2011; Affleck, 1996)
- A sense of agency fostered by supportive environments in which people feel valued and can act with choice and intention

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The survey

Study research questions

- What themes and variations are evident in academic instruction librarians':
 - **conceptions** of teacher agency?
 - **experiences** of teacher agency?
- What factors influence academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency?

Agency, as
defined in this
survey

“Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments. This study explores librarians’ experiences of teacher agency: essentially, the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles. This survey will ask about your experiences of agency in the context of your library instruction work. For the purpose of this survey, library instruction work refers to all encompassed activities, including but not limited to scheduling, designing, delivering, assessing, and coordinating instruction/instruction programs.”

Survey questions

- In what ways do you experience agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to your sense of agency?
- In what ways do you experience lacking agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to this?
- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you experience a greater sense of agency?
- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you manage experiences of lacking agency?
- Does the concept of teacher agency evoke for you certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings?



Findings

Stages for analysis

- Open coding revealed multitude of themes
- Current focus: Conceptions and experiences of teacher agency as an individual and/or shared phenomenon
- Future analyses:
 - Affective orientations toward the concept of teacher agency
 - Key factors that influence experiences of having/lacking teacher agency:
 - relationships (primarily with faculty, secondarily with library colleagues and administrators, thirdly with students)
 - institutional structure and culture
 - instructional mode
 - accumulation of teaching experience

Population

- Open to academic librarians with at least one year of professional experience in providing instructional services in an academic or college library setting
- 73 respondents
- Institution type:
 - Doctoral-granting research institution: 49.3%
 - 4-year undergraduate college: 17.8%
 - Regional comprehensive university: 15.1%
 - Community or technical college: 8.2%
 - Other: 9.6%
- Job classification:
 - Tenured or tenure-track faculty: 41.1%
 - Professional staff: 30.1%
 - Non-tenure track faculty: 23.3%
 - Other: 5.5%

Population: Demographics

■ Age

- 30-39 years: 39.7%
- 50-59 years: 24.7%
- 40-49 years: 20.5%
- 18-29 years: 9.6%
- 60+ years: 5.5%

Gender

- Female: 91.8%
- Male: 5.5%
- Prefer not to answer: 2.7%

Race/ethnicity

- White/Caucasian: 91.8%
- Prefer not to answer: 4.1%
- Hispanic or Latinx: 2.7%
- Asian American or Asian: 1.4%

Population: Teaching experience

- **Years of library instruction experience**
 - 6-10 years: 30.1%
 - 2-5 years: 27.4%
 - 16-20 years: 15.1%
 - 11-15 years: 13.7%
 - 20+ years: 11.0%
 - Under 2 years: 2.7%
- **Other teaching experience**
 - Yes: 56.2%
 - No: 41.8%

Individual and collective views of teacher agency

- A spectrum of descriptions of teacher agency as individual/collective
- Majority of participants described teacher agency as both a collective and an individual phenomenon (75.34%, or 55/73)
- About one-fourth of participants described teacher agency primarily in terms of the individual (25.66%, or 18/73)
- All participants acknowledged that their relationships with others played important roles in their experiences of agency.
- The large majority indicated that much of their pedagogical work occurred in collaboration with others.
- Interpersonal dynamics and power evident throughout descriptions of individual/collective agency

Uses of terms *we* and *our*

- Individual-centered focus on teacher agency
 - *We*: 5.56% (1/18)
 - *Our*: 11.11% (2/18) participants
- Teacher agency in both individual and collective terms
 - *We*: 47.27% (26/55)
 - *Our*: 45.45% (25/55)

Teacher agency as individual...

- “I have **almost complete agency over my instruction** work because there is **no cohesive or comprehensive instruction program** currently at my library. Also, I’m the **only designated teaching librarian** with instruction as a major component of my job duties.”
- “I feel agency when I’m teaching because **I am the one leading class.**”

...and yet teacher agency also possible because of structures and relationships.

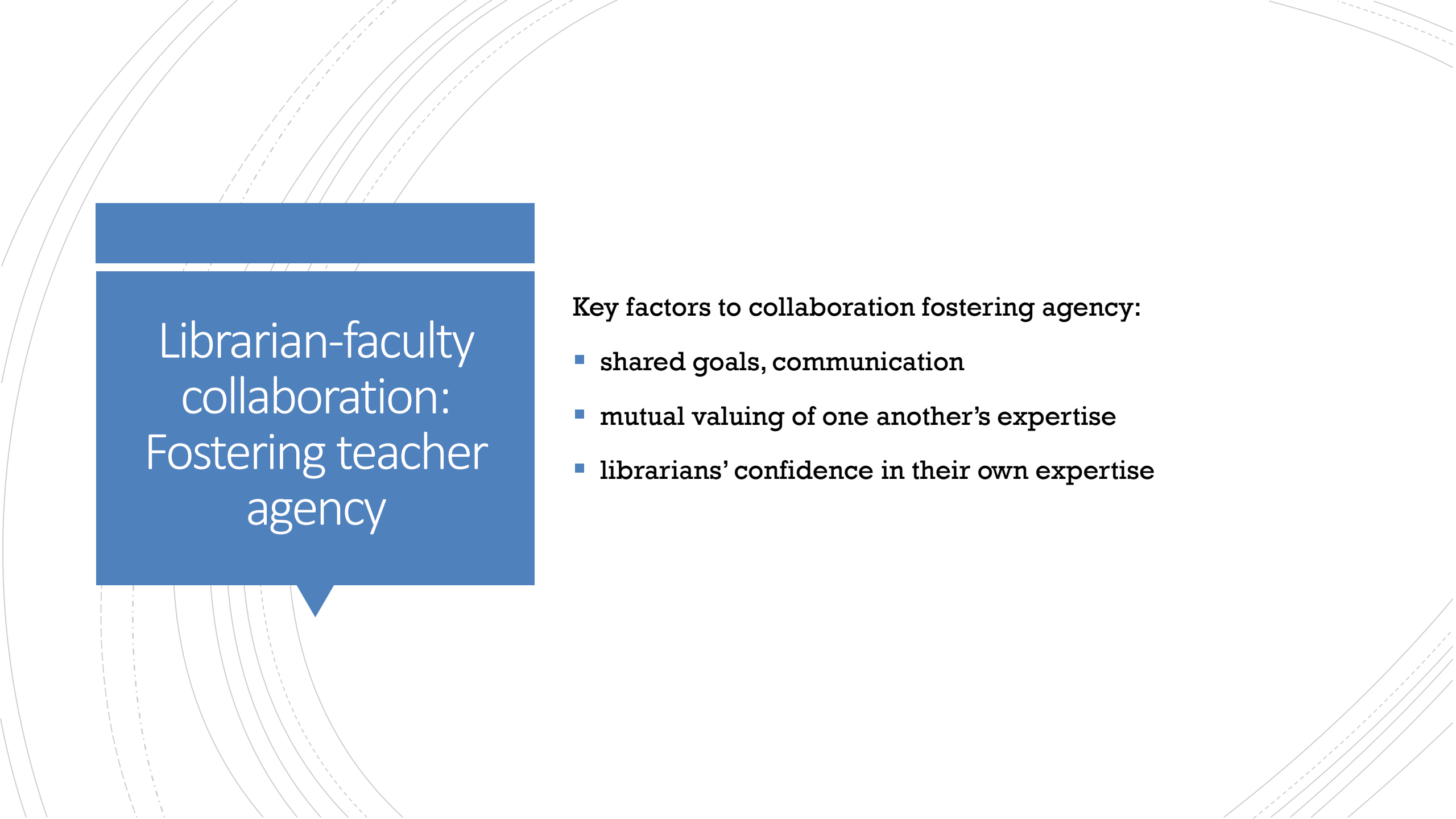
- “My library's **administrative structure** gives us **freedom** to manage **our** own instruction.”
- “There is **no script that I'm told to follow**. I decide what is included, what exercises to incorporate if any, etc.”
- “My work as a subject librarian is **very individual**. I navigate **my own relationships** with faculty and **negotiate** when and how to do instruction. Faculty are generally content to let me teach sessions in the way that I see as best.”

Teacher agency as collective

- “**Our sense of community** is a big part of feeling agency - that I am trusted to make decisions for my role and that I'll be supported in that.”
- “[W]e have **procedural and systemic agency in our work** which obviates the need to try to manufacture a sense of agency where any is lacking.”

Library work environments and cultures

- “I'm currently at **an institution where librarians are very much considered equal peers to faculty**, by both the majority of the faculty as well as the administration. And I have worked in **many academic institutions where that is definitely NOT the case**. I think in the majority of academic institutions, librarians are considered to be at least one tier below the faculty, which results in lower teacher agency.”
- “I've been lucky/privileged to work for **a department that allows us a lot of agency**. I think if that weren't true, I would have a really difficult time with that.”

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Librarian-faculty collaboration: Fostering teacher agency

Key factors to collaboration fostering agency:

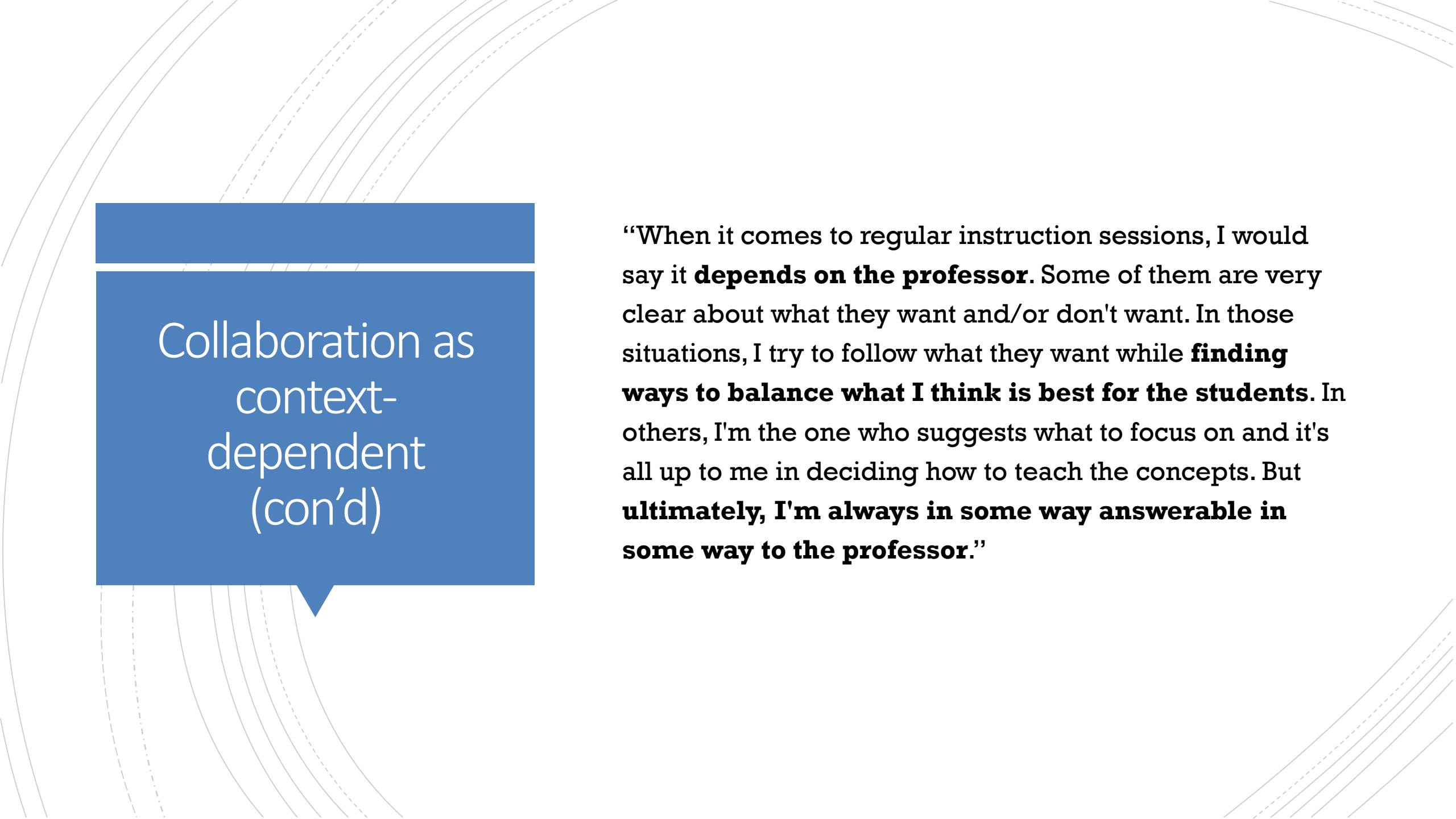
- shared goals, communication
- mutual valuing of one another's expertise
- librarians' confidence in their own expertise

Librarian-faculty collaboration: Fostering teacher agency (con'd)

- “The biggest strategy is taking a collaborative approach to instruction. ... Looking at the **instruction process as a collaborative effort helps to increase my agency**, since, as the instruction librarian, I'm the expert on information literacy and can **offer that expertise to the conversation** as well as tailor it to meet specific needs.”
- “I find that I have the most agency when I already have an **established relationship with a given faculty member**. Once they've gotten to know me and have developed **confidence in my expertise** and teaching ability, I find that they give me a lot more leeway about what to cover in a class and how.”

Collaboration as context- dependent

- “I feel I have agency when I work with **professors who trust my expertise** and let me use my best judgment regarding what the students need to know [...]. [...] **Sometimes I'm forced to teach what they want** (even if I think I have a better idea) just to keep them happy and maintain their trust in the library. I think a lot of times our librarians and staff **defer to them just so they'll keep using our services and requesting instruction.**”
- “Exerting agency often feels **risky**. What if I convince the professor to do something other than what they envisioned, or other than what a librarian has done with their class in the past, and then it doesn't work out?”



Collaboration as
context-
dependent
(con'd)

“When it comes to regular instruction sessions, I would say it **depends on the professor**. Some of them are very clear about what they want and/or don't want. In those situations, I try to follow what they want while **finding ways to balance what I think is best for the students**. In others, I'm the one who suggests what to focus on and it's all up to me in deciding how to teach the concepts. But **ultimately, I'm always in some way answerable in some way to the professor.**”

Advocates for
teacher
agency...

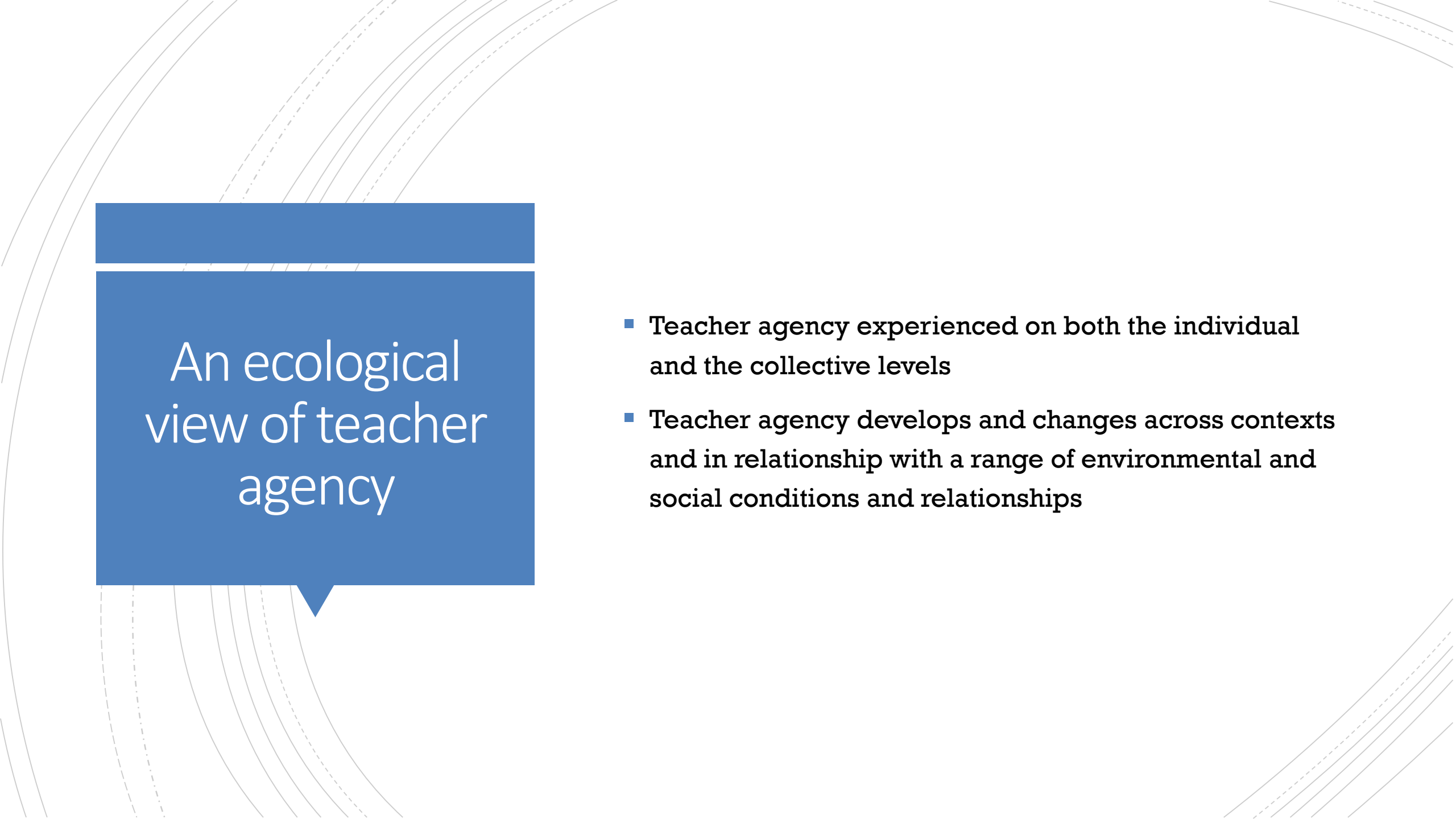
“As the head of instruction for many years, I have worked to create an environment where librarians who teach know they are **empowered to make decisions about their teaching in collaboration with faculty** with whom they work including timing and content, and that the **library has their back** if there are complaints about this. ... I'm very lucky to have been **supported in my organization to develop this culture where librarians can draw upon their own expertise** and in 99+% of the cases, faculty appreciate what we have to offer, even when we suggest something different than what they initially wanted, and we have developed **strong partnerships** with our teaching faculty.”

...who also
recognize the
challenges

“[N]o matter what is in place and what culture we try to perpetuate in the library, **sometimes things happen that make you feel devalued as a professional** or like a library instruction vending machine where faculty just **insert a token and press** in what they want and you deliver. When that happens, **having like-minded colleagues to talk to is helpful.**”

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Key Findings and Implications

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An ecological view of teacher agency

- **Teacher agency experienced on both the individual and the collective levels**
- **Teacher agency develops and changes across contexts and in relationship with a range of environmental and social conditions and relationships**

Key takeaways

- For the majority of study participants, conceptions and experiences of teacher agency exist in close relationship with experiences of meaning, purpose, and self-actualization.
- Almost all participants expressed appreciation for the concept of teacher agency and its relevance to both individual and collaborative pedagogical work. For some the concept was new.
- Conceptions and experiences of teacher agency have an important connection to environmental factors like work culture and relationships.
- Conceptions and experiences influence and shape one another.

Implications

Reflections on and discussions about teacher agency may serve as openings for exploring:

- ways to foster both individual and collective agency, and to balance the two
- the kinds of work and teaching environments and conditions that librarians wish to foster
- implicit assumptions that librarians may bring to their instructional work, as well as a wider range of possibilities for how librarians approach their instructional roles and work environments and relationships
- preventing burnout and cultivating communities and cultures of care

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