



Applying systems thinking to address labor in language programs

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Abstract

The paper discusses a case study of how a Modern Language Department at a liberal arts college in the U.S. addressed a college-wide call for departments to propose their own workload model in reaction to shifting education initiatives. Despite the autonomy to propose their own model, the language department faculty struggled to articulate their situation, much less a proposal. It was not until the department applied a visual analysis of its workload that it was able to discover how unarticulated assumptions and behaviors contributed to the larger conundrum of its invisible and emotional labor concerns. This paper proposes systems thinking (Meadows, 2008), an approach that takes a holistic view of interconnected elements, their behavior and function, as a framework to reveal the complexity of our labor, thereby rendering tangible the hidden structures and dynamics of language programs. Systems thinking is a method for critically examining and evaluating our work as language educators, especially as we adjust to new post-pandemic norms that are adding stress to an already overstrained faculty. An applied systems thinking model can identify multiple facets of language faculty labor concern, including the relationship between unobvious or unintended components and thus, potentially provide a pathway towards specific behavioral outcomes of change.

Keywords: *Systems Thinking, Faculty Workload, Language Programs, Invisible Labor*

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Introduction

In 2014, my college’s department chairs and program directors appealed to the Academic Affairs Council, a college-wide committee that oversees the curriculum, asking the Council to revise faculty teaching credit so that the teaching course load could reflect increasing college-wide curricular demands, including the growing emphasis on undergraduate research and interdisciplinary courses. They realized departments and programs differ in how they meet the 24 contact hours required for a full teaching load. Not every department receives teaching credit for senior theses and independent research projects. The Council let individual departments and programs propose—if they so desired—resource- and enrollment-neutral reforms to departmental teaching load models. It asked departments and programs to consider where “high impact practices” such as small classes, individual instruction, writing intensive courses, and labs have their greatest pedagogical benefit and where they may be less important. All revised teaching load models must look holistically at the anticipated effects on staffing (tenure track, lecturer, and adjunct) and students (majors/minors), curriculum (interdisciplinary and general education), and physical space and equipment. Since the new procedure for revising department loading models was approved in 2020, five departments submitted proposals, and four of those have been approved (History, Psychology, Biology, and Philosophy). All the proposed reforms addressed giving additional teaching credit for supervision of theses and research students.

The mandate should have resulted in straightforward questions for our language department to ask of itself: What are our programs' core courses? What are our core priorities? What aspects of our teaching do we want to be recognized for? It turns out, our department had in prior years, and at the behest of the college deans, drastically reduced its major requirements to attract more majors. We trimmed our curriculum to the "bare bones," two-thirds to one-half of the course credits for the major required by other departments across the college. At our college all courses count as one course credit towards the 36 credit students need to graduate. 40 course credits are needed for engineering. Many of our language programs consistently bargained with the administration to allow the running of underenrolled courses (less than six students) and frequently taught senior theses and independent studies without teaching credit. The loading discussion in our department was complicated because each language program has its own inherent structures and stressors that defy any universal adoption of a singular loading model. In short, the department faculty drew a blank when trying to imagine a new teaching load model.

As then department chair, I wondered why our department faculty faced such difficulty coming up with a new model. What was keeping us from harnessing the agency the college gave us to determine our workload? Did we have a clear understanding of our labor? What did we need to better understand the dominant, though unarticulated, obstacles that kept us from better understanding our labor context? Faculty can be agents of change (Zembylas, 2002), but only if they understand the problem.

Our department discussions centered on how overworked we felt and yet our intense focus on the prescribed teaching contact hours yielded no new information or solutions. The overwhelming sentiment in our meetings was one of exhaustion, which left us unable to act. I wanted to see if we could find a way out of this stagnation. Having long been interested in systems thinking, I saw how the isolated problems we discussed connected with the larger, institutional or professional dynamics and thought that we could best derive a solution if we understood our teaching in a broader context (Darder, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2014; Levine & Phipps, 2012). I needed to find a way to help our department address the immediate teaching contact hour issue before us as well as the broader issues of our affective labor, which emerged during our discussions. I had recently been reading research about the effects of labor, agency, and emotions on language faculty, which identify the affective components of teaching as a caring profession (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Warner & Diao, 2022). Since faculty labor cannot be separated from the emotions of its actors (Zembylas, 2002), I felt our department could find a teaching load model more readily if we understood our labor conditions within the larger dynamic of unarticulated institutional practices, as well as professional and personal expectations.

The department faculty were willing to do what was needed to keep our language programs robust. So, it was puzzling to me why the department faculty fell uncharacteristically unresponsive when it came to addressing the course teaching load question, a core engagement with their actual labor practices. For instance, over the last decade, the department faculty had successfully identified specific issues or problems related to their work, including systemic problems within the college, such as the college privileging registration of first year students to science courses over language classes, an inexplicable, multi-year decline in the number of advisees assigned to the department faculty, omitting mention of languages on admissions tours through the department building, and pervasive emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) in all college-wide communications. The proactive department faculty dutifully divided up responsibilities and worked with the college's various offices to highlight the underrepresentation of languages at the college and made sure the language department had representation on all major college-wide committees. Surely, I thought, this broad institutional knowledge we had should translate easily into deciding a workload model. Could it be that there were other problems related to our labor the faculty had not yet identified? What was it about our labor that rendered us so inarticulate? Why was our labor so elusive to us?

Context

This paper uses a case study of how a multiple-language program department in a private, Northeast liberal

arts college used systems thinking to visualize its workload and to develop a richer interpretation of its labor conditions. The department offers four majors (Chinese, French, German, Spanish), two interdepartmental majors (Japanese and Russian), one-year, non-degree courses in two languages, and two one-term courses to support study abroad programs. The department, at the time of this study, constituted 13 tenured faculty, one assistant professor, two lecturers, two visiting professors, and seven adjuncts.

Language learning and teaching is part of an “ecological holism” situated within a complex dynamic system (Swanson & Levine, 2020). Our higher education institution mirrors the national climate where multilingualism and multiculturalism compete in the STEM-inflected market; business, health, and technology fields appear to have more value (Diao & Liu, 2021). The language department constitutes the most diverse faculty (gender, race, class, religious affiliation, national origin) at the college and our courses attract the largest number of diverse students (Bouhet, 2019), yet, like most institutions, our department continues to witness a decline in total language enrollments, even if some language enrollments remain stable or increase (Lusin, et al., 2023). Our situation reflects a national trend, where the function of language programs—intercultural competency, interpersonal communication, international understanding, cross-cultural diversity, and expanded worldviews—resists the managerial thrust of higher education (Ginsberg, 2011). This suggests a conflict between local values and the institutional system values when it comes to faculty labor.

Faculty Workload

It is difficult to hold a complete picture about what constitutes faculty labor. The accumulation of administrative tasks, focus on student well-being and participatory management practices have added additional burdens on faculty workload (Gonzales et al., 2013; Goode, et al., 2020; Massé & Hogan, 2010; Walker, 2009) and fall heavily on the shoulders of women and historically marginalized faculty in the workforce as an informal type of “cultural taxation” (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). Faculty tend to discuss their labor in the context of “constraint.” This can mean real or perceived limitations to professional growth, unfair working conditions, lack of financial or mentoring support, or the inability to manage increasing demands on faculty time to manage tasks outside teaching, research, and service norms (Gappa, et al., 2007). Descriptions of faculty work and institutional challenges include *invisible*, *imperiled*, *barrier*, *survival*, [emphasis added] among other related terms. Solution-oriented counter-narratives focus on *restructuring*, *rethinking*, *reframing*, *reconsidering*, [emphasis added] etc. (O’Meara, et al., 2008, p. 17). The result is that some faculty feel like they are “treading water” (O’Meara, et al., 2008, p. 2) or have reached a level of burnout, leading to a plurality of anecdotal data for which institutions often respond by creating coping and management structures that can, and do, add to the burden itself. Despite efforts to quantify faculty labor through various equity model scenarios, the complexity of faculty workload remains underexplored in theory and practice. In short, the classic 40%-40%-20% division of labor between teaching, research, and service does not reflect actual working conditions at most institutions (Dixon & Tervanotko, 2021; Yucker, 1984).

Constraint may be the operative word that faculty use to define their labor conditions, but this only scratches the surface of how the neoliberal labor regime manages our time and affect. Most of our labor is immaterial, and it is this immateriality by which we define our subjectivity as well as our labor value (Lazzarato, 1996; Massé & Hogan, 2010). Teaching is an affective enterprise with emphasis on caring (Miller & Gkonou 2018, 2023). Teachers attend to the feeling rules of the workplace, dealing with the affective needs of students and colleagues (Zembylas, 2002). In language programs, caring is pedagogy (Warner & Diao, 2022). When seen through an immaterial labor lens, this caring inscribes the language pedagogy experience in a much broader sense, but can leave faculty feeling as if they are on an emotional roller coaster (Gkonou, et al., 2020) or burned out (Acheson, et al. 2016). Labor management ensures we see our work from the lens of independent, individual actors, instead of recognizing the socio-historical conditions that shape and define our subjectivity as well as what we think defines good pedagogy (Miller & Gkonou, 2023; Zembylas, 2002). While the labor regime tries to ignore affect and context (Zembylas, 2002), the reality is that they

are important elements of the institution's public economy.

Workload in Language Programs

Just as culture's complexity defies obvious visualization, so too, does our work dynamic as language faculty, which operates much below the surface of visible productivity and is classically categorized as a nebulous balance of teaching, research, and service (Modern Language Association [MLA], 1996). Historically, faculty in language programs engage in certain labor that not only emphasizes student intellectual, linguistic, and intercultural growth, but also embodies an empathetic mindset nurtured through critical thinking experiences. This pedagogy requires language teachers to engage to a high degree in community building, interpersonal engagement, and to foster positive feelings inside and outside the classroom that revolve around differences. To do so, language faculty develop improvisational and interpretive forms of communication that guide students towards divergent ways of thinking. While language output itself may show correct grammar, there is no single, rigid answer or end goal to developing additional linguistic and cultural competencies. The norms within language departments extend beyond the classroom, already rich with interactive modes of learning and culturally rich realia, to a broader teaching context of high-impact pedagogies, such as language tables, movie nights, game nights, language labs, language clubs, often deemed "extracurricular," and thus less valued within the institutional or professional context. In addition, language program labor includes providing emotional support, mentorship and guidance, communication, organization and planning to help students overcome language learning anxiety, increase motivation, and learn to see themselves as others. While classroom teaching is the work we do for pay within the institution, most language faculty conform to the conditioned, unconscious, and learned norms of the kind of labor that are not assigned institutional value, yet are essential to the construction and maintenance of self and community (Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Massé & Hogan, 2010). The distinction between the classroom teaching hour as valued labor and the affective work as undervalued has much to do with long-seated gendered conceptions of the moral and dignified worth of paid labor, versus the uncompensated labor that nevertheless maintains and develops communal life (Daniels, 1987). In the academic institutional context, out-of-classroom labor operates as part of an institution's economy and therefore, not officially registered or valued (by the institution or faculty themselves) as intellectual labor (Massé & Hogan, 2010). And yet these labor activities take up a large portion of faculty time, especially in more "service-intensive" fields like language instruction (Modern Language Association, 2009).

Our work as language faculty exists within a complex dynamic of unarticulated or unexamined assumptions, behaviors, and practices, some of which have served language faculty well and some of which could use a reexamination in light of changing demands in education. The current situation calls for a critical perspective that foregrounds the materiality of such labor to educate institutions about their own ecosystems and to better imagine a sustainable, more equitable workload. When it came to our department, it was clear that something was keeping us from being strategic about sorting and prioritizing our workload, though it was not quite clear to me why this was happening. I wondered if a systems thinking approach to our situation might provide a greater insight and help us set a course of action. I had been teaching systems thinking in a project-based language course on the environment and sustainability. Impressed by my students' growth in understanding the complexity of addressing climate change through climate action, I thought of adapting systems thinking exercises within department meetings to see if we might, in the words of Meadows (2008) "hone our abilities to understand parts, see interconnections, ask 'what-if' questions about possible future behaviors, and be creative and courageous about system redesign" (p. 7). In short, I thought a systems thinking approach to our workload problem might reveal to us the obstacles that prevented us from finding a workload solution and enhance our strategic thinking and prioritization. Along the way, we discovered that systems thinking illuminated our language departments' immaterial and affective labor in unexpected ways.

Systems Thinking as a Method for Discovery

A system is made up of interrelated elements that are organized for a specific function or purpose (Meadows, 2008) (see [Figure 1](#)). An example of a system is a language department (element) that is made up of a single or multiple language programs (other elements), individual faculty members of various ranks, administrative assistants, possibly language fellows or assistants, and students, whose purpose (function) is to engage with linguistic and cultural competency. The language department exists and operates within a larger system (connections), such as the academic institution (element) made up of other departments, administrators, students, support staff, cleaning staff, trustees, etc. (other elements), which in turn interacts with larger systems that aim to educate the entire student body or establish criteria for effective education and programs. An institution, thus, is nestled within larger systems, for example: local K-16 education, local employment, national educational accrediting bodies, and federal employment regulations, among others.

Systems thinking allows one to examine the interconnected components that constitute complex systems and their specific behaviors, be they natural, political, or social. Whether used for business and management operations, science and engineering models, or mapping climate change, systems thinking is an effective tool to discover where one can intervene in the system to bring about change (Meadows, 2008). The systems thinking approach I used came from the work of Donella Meadows, a US climate scientist and educator. A system's behavior stems from interactions with other elements, which operate continuously in a dynamic (that is, non-static) way. Thus, external and internal mechanisms keep a system in constant motion. It is always seeking balance between competing and incongruent forces that shape and shift over time.

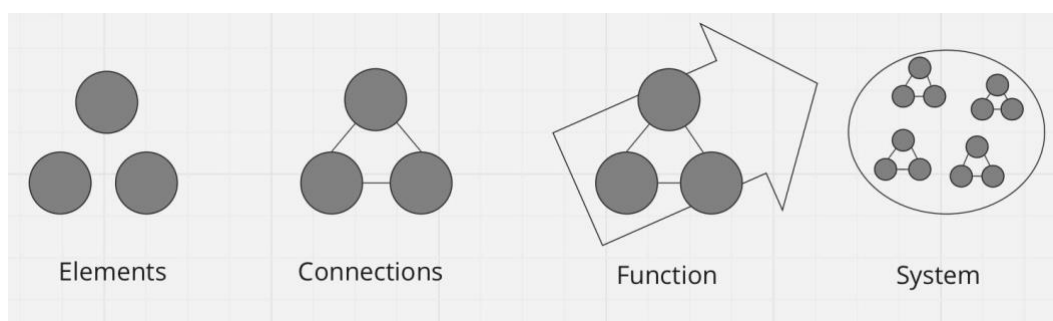


Figure 1. A system's elements, connections, and function.

While the three main elements of a system (its elements, the interconnections between the elements, and the function) are important components, it is the function or purpose that drives a system's behavior. There may be many functions or purposes within a system. For example, a language department operates to teach students how to interact in multilingual, multicultural communities. The admissions department functions to attract a steady stream of new students to the college, while the administration acts to preserve the longevity of the institution. These functions all drive the behavior of the system, but they do not necessarily impact it equally.

The function is not immediately obvious, especially when a system's dynamism is the result of the various functions of multiple elements. It is difficult to understand a system's behavior. Our brains tend to focus on discrete or short-term factors, seeking linear, cause and effect relationships between isolated elements instead of taking a macro-perspective of the system's long-term behaviors and structures. "The overwhelming majority of everyday experience involves simple systems where cause and effect are closely related in time and space, time delays are short, and information cues are highly correlated" (Sterman & Sweeney, 2007, p. 60). In general, this leads to a "weak intuitive understanding" of elements and their interactions, especially since their relationship function is best revealed over time (p. 61). Accumulation, as in the increasing quantity of work tasks or responsibilities over time, is a difficult concept to grasp (Sterman & Sweeney, 2007), but understanding it may help shed light on workload intensification.

Systems Thinking and Language Programs´

Much of the research literature on language programs and departments acknowledges the socio-cultural and institutional contexts but focus largely on the curriculum at the program or department levels. Levine and Phipps´ (2012) edited volume sheds light on the unconscious framework behind language teaching and learning practices. Swanson and Levine (2020) propose an ecological framing to clarify the unarticulated, theoretical underpinnings of language teaching and departmental structures. They focus on the obstinate bifurcation in curriculum structures, on language learning itself as a complex structure, and recognize that the language department’s own dynamic complexity and behavior are shaped by institutional, national, and global influences. They suggest that most language programs place unequal weight on micro perspectives, thus overlooking meso-, and macro-levels that could allow departments to be adaptive to change. They offer concrete actions to broaden language learning’s ecology within the institution and local community. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) provide a rich understanding of systems thinking to the field of applied linguistics in the areas of language development, discourse, and the classroom. As important as these studies are to improving the quality and longevity of language education in academic institutions, they do not address language teaching as a labor practice.

When considering the increase of faculty labor, we can think of it like a bathtub, which has an inflow of water, a stock of water, and an outflow of water (see [Figure 2](#)). Research shows that the human mind tends to focus more on the stocks, i.e., the micro-view of the current workload (Serman & Sweeney, 2007). However, it is also important to recognize the system’s action over time: both its inflow, adding more water, i.e., taking on more work; and the outflow, letting water flow out of the tub, i.e., letting go of certain labor activities (Meadows, 2008). The bathtub model is a systems thinking tool, and one that can help us understand stocks, or the accumulation of labor, and flows, or the rate of change of the stock over time (Serman & Sweeney, 2007). Stocks and flows are interdependent aspects of a system and provide a key to understanding a system’s structure and where one might intervene. This model could help explain why faculty’s increased workload and responsibilities accumulated over time without their cognizance.



Figure 2. Image of bathtub stocks and flows.

To map a system, one needs to identify the imbalance of stocks and flows by examining the dynamic relationship of mutually influencing and interconnected elements, or feedback loops (see [Figure 3](#)). That is, our accumulated labor does not evolve from a vacuum, but from fluctuating, interdependent causes. For example, college major requirements (an element) positively or negatively affect students’ ability to engage with a language program’s coursework (another element). Or, in another example, information about the highest paying college majors can posit languages as either contributing to or detracting from career goals. Communication between the elements animates a system’s dynamic, which can be reinforcing or diminishing. Students decide which courses to take or which language to choose based on information they have received elsewhere (classmates, family, community, social media, all communication signals). In the case of the language department, the system operates through the flow of positive and negative feedback loops. Word of mouth about popular professors, exciting courses, the value of language learning for future careers, or having adequate staffing are the kinds of reinforcing information that positively affects the department, while negative perceptions about the value of language learning, the college registrar privileging STEM courses, or chronic understaffing in a department, for example, have diminishing effects

on the language department's function as a system. These positive or diminishing forces are what affect faculty labor.

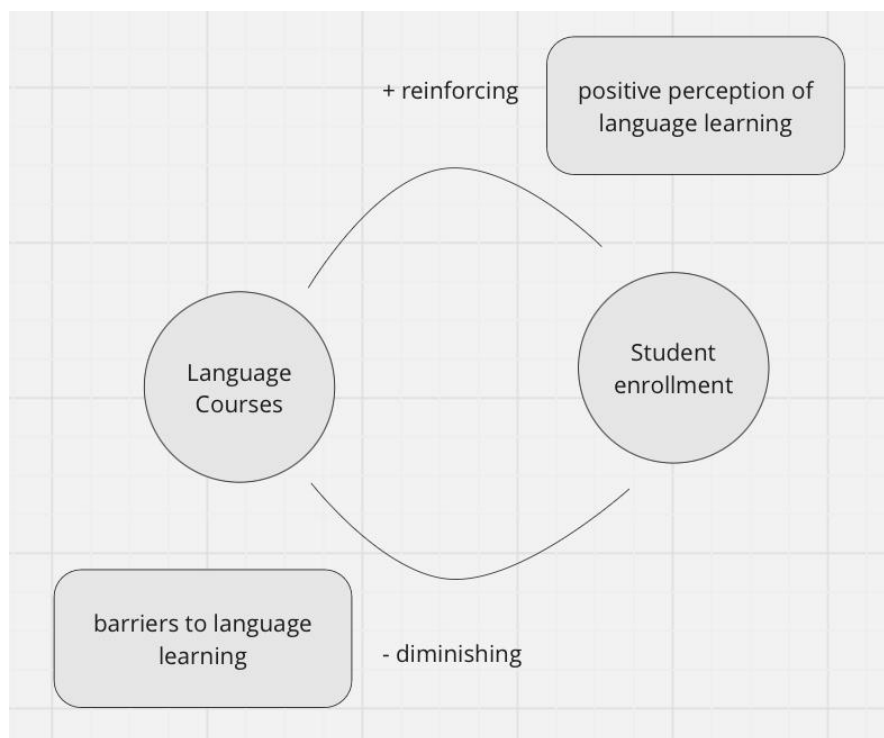


Figure 3. Reinforcing (positive) and diminishing (negative) feedback loops.

Visual Models and Perspective-Taking

Because a system's behavior is not immediately obvious, systems thinking applies visual representations to expose mental models and unarticulated assumptions. Such visualizations chart the interactions between elements, as well as give form to their function. Humans by nature view the world through visual models (Meadows, 2008). We organize ourselves around rules, regulatory criteria, constraints, and limitations as shorthand or simplified expressions of our interpreted world. We express models in multiple ways via signs, images, mathematics, diagrams, charts, etc. These can be physical artifacts or mental models (Tversky, 2011). Such organization becomes normalized as factual and fixed expressions of reality or the "real" world, even though they are also historically, socio-culturally, and politically specific. By assigning visual form to the ways we organize and interpret experience, we gain perspective on how we think and what we value. Visual models help reframe perception and clarify the abstract nature of systems. Researchers use tools such as fishbone diagrams, behavior-over-time graphs, causal loop diagrams, and other maps and charts to depict systems. Some system behaviors are quite common across different situations and are represented as systems archetypes (Kim, 2000). The purpose of these models is to illuminate the structures that shape a system's behavior over time, showing that systems are grounded not in fixed realities but in adaptable mental models. Visualization has the potential to shift perspective, spark insight, and foster problem-solving and innovation (Chou & Tversky, 2020).

As with all systems, the following case study possesses its own unique qualities inherent to the individual system. It reflects our department's experience applying a systems thinking framework to better understand the function of our faculty labor. In our case, we used systems thinking tools with the hope to gain greater perspective on our multifaceted workload and its accumulation over time, and to find leverage points in the system to adjust its behavior. Systems thinking tools help to visualize what is often unseen in a system, and we wanted to use these models to develop, discuss, and create a shared interpretation of labor. What follows

below is not a “one size fits all” model, but an illustration of how systems thinking can be used to identify leverage points within a system. The solutions derived from this exercise were site-specific and might not be universally applicable. I hope that examples from this case study might inspire other language department faculty to venture their own visualization exercises.

Case Study Background and Our Dilemma

When faced with the open-ended task to reconfigure the department workload model, the department faculty had difficulty conceptualizing their workload as a whole. This corresponds with Mancing’s (1994) insight that language faculty tend to focus their gaze narrowly on their specific teaching load (class hours) instead of workload, the broader context in which we work. Not only did we need to examine teaching, research, and service within our departmental system, but we also needed to discover how internal and external department elements interacted. In addition to blurred divisions between teaching, research, and service, faculty were also facing internalized and also formalized (through course and faculty evaluation criteria, for instance) assumptions about what it means to be a good or effective teacher, as well as performing the emotion labor involved in defending not just the status but the validity and overall usefulness of language study. The language department is a living, dynamic entity whose complexity manifests at the structural and socio-political levels. We needed to make this complexity explicit in order to understand and manage workload intensity. Moreover, in my work as chairperson, I wanted to make the multiple strands of our labor visible, hoping to bring to light the unarticulated assumptions about our labor, our identities, and values that constitute our ethical core as educators.

In the following I discuss the results of three exercises that revealed the system’s dynamic behavior, helped us visualize our workload accumulation, and enabled us to discover where the competing functions of the system’s elements might lead us to leverage points for alignment or change. I explain the activities, what we discovered, and the actions that developed through synthesis of what we gleaned from the exercises.

Visualization Exercise 1: Ecosystem Mapping

Since we are not accustomed to thinking in systems, one of the first tasks for us was to gain a complete picture or overview of the situation through observation. Using a cartographers’ gaze, we charted how our system fit within larger systems on a macro-level. We chose this approach first because our department faculty were most familiar with this view, having worked for years on building relationships with entities across the institution. In this particular exercise we wanted to capture what we already knew and to apply causal feedback loops to see if we gleaned new information.

In several participatory meetings early in the process, the department faculty mapped the language department within the larger ecosystem of the college with an eye towards identifying the links and connections with people (academic programs, college offices, as well as students and parents). We looked at the relationship correspondences and influences with other departments (area studies programs, social science, science, and engineering departments) in addition to college-wide offices (Admissions Office, the Dean of Studies Office, the Registrar, and International Programs). This mapping exercise helped us discover diminishing (negative) and reinforcing (positive) relationships across the institution. Armed with this new information, faculty set upon a series of actions that directly targeted these relationships (see [Table 1](#)).

The ecosystem mapping exercise provided us with a more concrete understanding of relationship correspondences. For example, after discovering several diminishing (negative) relationships, we created targeted actions: We held meetings with Admissions personnel to provide guidance on language learning benefits and pedagogies and worked with the Registrar and Dean of Studies to devise new course placement protocols for first year students. In addition, the language department prioritized working with specific departments and offices to increase greater communication and collaboration. We cooperated with them on initiatives to increase the flow of students to our programs. Thus, we worked to reinforce the connections we already had with several departments and expand the reach of our influence by connecting with less

affiliated ones.

Table 1. *Discoveries and Actions Derived from Mapping the Language Department Ecosystem*

Mapping Language Department Ecosystem			
System Element	Systems Thinking Activity	Discovery	Actions Developed through Synthesis of Exercise
College offices and other departments	Institutional Map	Reinforcing and diminishing relationships specific to each office or department	Concrete actions and meetings with different offices and departments in the college
Students, parents, and non-language faculty	Empathy Map	Reinforcing and diminishing perceptions about language learning's value	Target audience-specified messaging
Students	Data analysis	Significant student diversity in our classes; high number of first year students with diminishing enrollments of other class years if the students were not language majors	Concrete actions with Dean of Studies office for first-year student placement in language courses
Students	Student Survey at the end of each course	Students were not continuing the next sequence in the language because of scheduling conflicts with other courses for their major or general curriculum requirements	Language and double major Coursework Pathways; Meetings with specific departments to highlight affinities with language department

Additionally, the exercise revealed individuals and factors that we had previously overlooked. We used empathy mapping, a tool to discover what we know about the people who interacted (or had yet to interact) with our language department system. While an empathy map is not a systems thinking tool, it is a useful exercise that allowed us to discover two areas that were missing in our approach to attract students: parents and faculty from other departments. Through a visioning exercise to develop outreach activities for parents and students, as well as other departments, we were thus able to create targeted messaging to these entities. We designed a series of meetings with specific department faculty and students to highlight synergies, for example, between computer science and languages, and the leadership in medicine program and languages. We also created pathways or roadmaps for students interested in double-majoring or interdisciplinary majors, including biochemistry and languages, and engineering and languages.

In addition, we used college-wide and department data to better understand who was in our classrooms, who left after taking one or two courses with us, and who was not attending our classes. We discovered through an end-of-course survey which departments constituted challenges to our department's values and/or time schedules. One colleague's research helped us learn that between 2013-2019 student enrollments in the language department were more diverse than the rest of the college, and that the department's courses attract students with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (Bouhet, 2019). We analyzed historical data from the Dean of Studies Office to determine that most of our students were first year students, that most left our classes upon declaring another major in their sophomore year, and that if we did not get students in their first year, the likelihood of them enrolling in our courses was minimal. Armed with such information, we were able to target even more specifically our outreach audience and embark on retention strategies.

This mapping activity and the resulting actions helped the faculty to understand the complexity of their workload within a larger dynamic. While this exercise did not alleviate all the identified bottlenecks and barriers to language learning, it did provide a clear overview of the landscape and allowed the department to observe, be sensitive to, and act as needed when challenges associated with these interrelated systems

reemerged. This information provided us with the opportunity to more strategically align work tasks. Since dynamic systems are not static, they require action to balance or adjust over time. The department faculty made a plan to monitor where and when external actions negatively affected the department. Being sensitive to the dynamics of the system can help one improve trend recognition and adjust accordingly.

While these exercises did not directly help us answer the department workload question, they did help us better understand the stressors within our department that distracted us from being able to see the fuller picture and hindered us from working more strategically. However, we identified additional service tasks that increased workload. While we felt successful at identifying specific, tangible actions and targets for language advocacy, this exercise did not afford us the ability to see our labor from a different, broader perspective. In fact, we ended up unintentionally expanding our service activities and now needed to engage in re-prioritizing other activities to keep workloads manageable.

Visualization Exercise 2: Building a Model of Faculty Work by Identifying the System's Behavior Over Time

As department chair, I thought that we needed a more comprehensive understanding of our actual teaching practices and wondered whether we had enough data or information to measure faculty's labor output and how that output has behaved over time. I gathered institutionally reported teaching data for a six-year window. This included the contracted two courses per term (our college is on a 10-week trimester system and faculty carry a six-course/24 contact hour load for the academic year), in addition to other teaching engagements that did not receive compensation, such as independent studies and sophomore and senior theses. We decided to simulate our teaching load by applying the "fractional course credit" model used by the social science departments at the college to get a benchmark. Departments in the social sciences and sciences use a fractional credit calculus for senior thesis, research projects, and labs, a certain number of which constitute a full course credit. Thus, faculty in the social sciences commonly teach two to four courses a year and the rest of the load is spread over thesis supervision. Due to historical reasons, humanities departments do not participate in the fractional course credit system. The language department faculty receive no credit for interdisciplinary program theses despite being the largest contributor to the college's interdisciplinary programs and are asked regularly to direct senior theses for these programs, in addition to co-directing the increasing number of interdepartmental majors (such as French-Political Science, German-History, Chinese-Physics, etc.).

Our department also wanted to observe the effect of independent studies, a specific pressure point. Our faculty felt obliged to offer independent study courses for various reasons, but the most salient one was the need to use them as bridges for individual language majors. It was common for faculty to offer these uncredited courses to ensure that individual or small groups of students who could not meet at the regularly scheduled course times could continue in the next course sequence the following term. Ultimately, faculty viewed retaining students and majors as crucial for their job security. Even though faculty applied the same academic and pedagogical standards as any other course, such courses went uncompensated.

The results of this modeling were stunning and revealed in numeric expression the physical and mental exhaustion department faculty had long been feeling. Of the 16 tenured, tenure-track and full-time lecturers in the department (this exercise excluded seven adjuncts and two visiting professors because they did not teach beyond the six-course load), 11 taught, on average, the equivalent of an additional six courses within the six-year period. Chinese, French, and German faculty taught on average 1.25 more courses a year. Individual faculty in less commonly taught languages, such as Japanese and Russian, taught 1.5 to two additional courses per year. Spanish faculty taught on average .5 additional courses. Since Japanese and Russian are single person programs, they taught even more courses. The weight of the programs lay on their shoulders alone. One faculty member discovered that over the course of a three-year period they had offered six independent study courses, two independent study abroad courses, and was heavily involved in one senior thesis advising. This particular colleague is the only full-time faculty member of their program. Included in our loading exercise was a scenario where faculty received teaching credit for the supervision of language assistants. These assistants are responsible for teaching the weekly language lab hour at the

lower levels and assist with cultural programming, such as weekly language tables. Japanese and Russian colleagues are always in charge of their language assistants, whereas French, German, and Chinese can alternate between the two to three colleagues in the program. The Spanish program has a larger number of faculty and language assistant supervision is written into the labor contract of the Spanish lecturer. Faculty receive neither remuneration nor teaching compensation for language assistant supervision, so we wanted to include this labor-intensive responsibility in our model. We used the same fractional course credit simulation for supervising.

In addition to teaching, one faculty member in each language program serves as a language-specific program director. Language-specific program directors perform duties including coordinating all the classes for that language, supervising individual teaching assistants and adjuncts, developing curricula, planning and scheduling courses and staffing, and working as liaisons with the chair of languages department and the directors of the college-wide programs, with which their sections are affiliated. In addition, department faculty are often directors of interdisciplinary studies programs and participate on college-wide committees, knowing that these leadership positions increase the visibility of their language programs on campus and that their voice carries significant weight within the small institution.

Predictably, seeing the articulation of the language faculty's teaching load in concrete numerical expression was daunting. Despite having this concrete data available to us, the department still appeared to be immobilized and no closer to resolving their loading issue. To enact the partial credit model similar to the social sciences meant that the faculty would have to seek compensation from the college to continue this heavy load, or advocate for increased staffing: both options required greater college investment in the language department, which was unlikely to occur, given other financial demands across the college. We deliberated if faculty could rethink the kinds of courses they were teaching, eliminate some of the courses, such as independent studies, teach differently to offer multi-level courses, or partner with other area institutions. We faced many constraints: our college is on a quarter system while our consortium colleges are on a semester system; faculty adoption of new pedagogies or major restructuring of the language curriculum would require more time, training, and investment than what was available. Whereas some language programs could make some adjustments, others had special circumstances that indicated eliminating independent studies would mean the demise of the major, since those programs used independent studies to ensure a certain number of majors. Previous fact-finding exercises showed us that our enrollment issues were related to constraints outside the department. Students deeply enjoyed our classes, but self-reported that they dropped out of the sequences due to scheduling conflicts with their other major or the college's distribution requirement courses. This sometimes meant that students had to wait a year to continue the language sequences or a faculty member had to teach an independent class to make up the one term gap so students could continue within the same year. We faced a dilemma of grand proportions, wanting to respect the needs of the college for revenue-neutral solutions, the needs and interests of our students, while also attending to the integrity of our language programs and their long-term sustainability. We discovered that the college's existing fractional credit model in the social sciences would not work for us, yet alternative models remained elusive. In fact, simply identifying missing data, as we did in this exercise, will not always grant the fuller picture of a system. Data is meant to provide information via "feedback processes" (Meadows, 2008, p. 25); it is not meant to "fix" a system's problem.

The data observation we did as a department helped faculty identify extrinsic factors that shaped their professional practice (the additional expectations for research projects with students, department administrative tasks not listed in the original hiring contract, nor revised when labor demands at the institution shifted). Yet, this exercise did not immediately help them to articulate intrinsic factors that might reveal underlying assumptions and behaviors that inform faculty behavior and belief systems and kept them from immediately transferring the knowledge gained from the data visualization exercise into concrete action. That is because faculty attunement with the demands of the institution are unobserved elements of system behavior (Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Miller & Gkonou, 2023). To get closer to redefining our workload, the department faculty needed to have a clearer picture of not just their actual labor practices and to see it over time, but also recognize how their individual actions and beliefs shape, and are shaped by,

other elements in the system.

To truly understand a system's complexity and perhaps even find leverage points to intervene, focused attention on a singular event or element within a system is insufficient. Historical context or the interplay between interconnected events and elements within a system, or even the status of a system within other systems is not enough to understand the behavior of a system in its entirety. So, while the department faculty learned a lot in the data modeling exercise it focused too much on specific elements, and not enough on the system behavior. In order to understand the system better, we needed to readjust our lens. Faculty were missing an understanding of their own individual behavior within it. The faculty had adapted to the ever-shifting context at the college by adding new service work without considering how to shed or eliminate other forms of service. What resulted was a department facing an increasingly untenable workload and specific language programs and faculty who were near breaking point, facing burnout. The bathtub spigot was in full flow, but no one had unplugged the drain.

Visualization Exercise 3: Visual Map of Actual Workload Onto the 40%-40%-20% Schema

Despite the data in front of them, faculty still seemed disconnected from what they were reading from it. I decided to engage the faculty in a group visualization exercise with an extensive list of labor activities that were generally uniform across all language programs. These activities were represented visually on individual pieces of paper. Blank pieces were provided for any additional activities that occurred to the faculty. Faculty were asked to place the listed activities onto a large whiteboard under the headings “teaching”, “research”, and “service.” This exercise was done as a group so that we could discuss when there was a discrepancy whether an activity belonged under teaching or service, for example, and thus collectively articulate the contours of our shared labor values (see [Figure 4](#)).

The exercise revealed a telling snapshot of faculty workload in the department. Even though all faculty in this exercise were evaluated annually by the college-wide standard of 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service, very few activities populated the research category, which meant that faculty spent less time on research. This could be a factor why the department had so few full professors at the time (Modern Language Association, 2009). The most revealing information gleaned from this exercise was the number of activities that faculty nestled between the teaching and service categories. Discussion among faculty highlighted the ambiguity of some of our work and whether it constituted teaching or service, or both. After externalizing the department faculty workload in this visual fashion, some faculty remained mute. Seeing their labor visually expressed in this new manner required not only a perception shift, but also a revised approach to the problem. Others took it as a license to say “no” to a multitude of tasks that they assessed as not serving their needs for promotion to full professor. This included extra-curricular activities and additional independent studies.



Figure 4. Department workload distribution visualization exercise.

Results

The department's visualization exercises helped illuminate the influences and societal issues inherent to

our particular system, as well as its dynamism. Externalizing our actions into a visual model also provided a critical distance, thus reducing, although not eliminating, the emotional component of decision-making. Teaching and service labor are tied up with faculty self-identity, so emotional distance from the problem opened up some space for creative problem-solving. Consequently, the externalized representation of our workload opened up the possibility for us to reinterpret the beliefs and practices that we define as our ethical core. For example, our department's focus on creating community and fostering intercultural communication through communal activities did not correspond neatly to the institutional shift toward individual student research models. We also noticed a communication gap between what we understand to be the inherent interdisciplinary focus of our pedagogy and the college's call for more interdisciplinary courses.

While systems thinking helped us visualize our workload, it did not necessarily lead us to a more critical examination and evaluation of our assumptions and interpretations about our work as language educators. The next steps for the department were to discuss values and strategic priorities, then align tasks according to those values and priorities. As I discuss below, we were only partially successful. Individual faculty reactions to the visualization exercise revealed the difficulty of systems change. Since this series of exercises, several faculty members increased their research productivity and were promoted to full professor. Most all department faculty, except for those in one specific language program, stopped teaching independent studies and combined independent theses into a one-term course whenever possible. One language program created more flexible course sequencing in the intermediate-advanced levels, and the faculty collectively revised department vision and mission statements. Other faculty, however, have yet to participate in further discussions.

To this day, the department has neither redefined their teaching workload model nor committed to keeping the existing model. While the visualization exercises provided a framework for "sharpening edges and corners, by filling in gaps, by normalizing shapes" (Tversky, 2011, p. 502) of our system, we still need to do more to find out if we have failed to identify the boundaries of the system, are hampered by our own habits of mind, or whether we are ready to change our mindsets. In general, most faculty are proactively approaching pieces of this complex workload puzzle with greater understanding and agency. We continue to sense that our interdisciplinary work is underappreciated at the college and are exploring ways to raise its visibility. As a department, our systems thinking exercises provided concrete expression to the stocks and flows of our labor as well as provided feedback loops. As we move forward, we can benefit from discussions about cultivating the kind of system design that integrates institutional requirements with our core values.

Implications

Workload overcapacity is an overwhelming, unaddressed phenomenon in higher education (Gonzalez et al., 2014). Like a bathtub that can only hold so much water before it overflows, human labor capacity also has limitations. We cannot stop our workload from increasing without finding a way to release or redirect some of those responsibilities, just as we cannot adjust the temperature of a bathtub without first opening the plug and draining water to allow for the inflow of hotter water from the faucet so as to avoid overflow. Our ability to understand this comes when we can step out of a given or known framework to observe how a system behaves and to locate places to intervene.

The systems thinking exercises our department conducted provided important feedback information. In our case, it allowed us to distinguish reinforcing and diminishing feedback loops between our department and other areas of the institution, observe the permutations of our labor over time, and to discover where our actions and values as language educators fit within the stated values of the institution. These important findings show us concretely how our labor is tied to social practice and power relations within our institutional and political systems. As for next steps, our department needs to do more work to understand how our teaching identity, our individual decision-making, and affect sit within this dynamic. Future work needs to balance language faculty's self-definition within their historical, socio-cultural, socio-political

contexts (Benesch, 2018; Cross, 2010; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Swanson & Levine, 2020) with the social reality of individual experience (Breen, 1985).

The exercises we did as a department were beneficial for resolving certain parts of our problems, but it could not solve all of them. The final workload visualization exercise brought us to a place to discuss our personal investment in our labor and how we derive value from it, especially since the quality and quantity of our labor is organized around its immateriality within the system (Lazzarato, 1996). Faculty's reactions to this realization should not be judged as any individual's failure to address the problem. Our affective relationship to our labor is part of the system's structure. Our language department faculty's difficulty in devising a new teaching load model (or keeping the current one) may reveal that we need to examine the system more carefully. The workload proposal itself may give a false sense of agency to a faculty who have little control over their labor in a work-saturated environment. It could also be faculty's act of refusal to be "owned" by the labor; an act of resistance and rebellion to engage in participatory management so pervasive in academia (Adams, et al., 2021). Our crossroads is both specific to the members of the department, but also subject to wider-reaching external forces that are radically shifting educational and political trends, including the economic uncertainty at institutions that are affecting all language programs.

What makes our labor so complex is that it includes aspects that are both immaterial and emotion-driven. Care work is unacknowledged and undervalued; however, it is a critical component of the new developments in higher education, especially as it pertains to student recruitment and retention, and demands on faculty to provide greater emotional and cognitively relevant support for their students (Lawless, 2018). The care-centered nature of teaching "fulfill[s] our deepest-held beliefs about the importance of existence in community and the need to achieve change and support for our colleagues and students" (Massé & Hogan 2010, p. 5). It exceeds the traditional teaching-research-service boundaries. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the connection between teaching and caring, pedagogy and emotion labor, were made ever more salient as faculty attended to the rapid transition to online teaching while extending care to their students (Warner & Diao, 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, pressures on faculty time and energies increased exponentially (Dasgupta et al., 2024), but institutional labor evaluation has not changed to incorporate this.

Several factors make for an increasingly disruptive and unstable terrain for educators: drops in language program enrollments, closures of language programs and departments, increasing nationalist and isolationism rhetoric at political levels that, through restrictive legislation, dictate what faculty can and cannot teach. Self-management in the neoliberal capitalist workplace, increased job insecurity with the closing of language departments (and colleges in general), has workers investing more at greater risk and without compensation. Thus, it may feel as if the system is turning on itself, when in reality it is exercising its dynamism. The function of individual elements such as language program faculty labor and its care work may not match the purpose of the college-wide system, such as institutional decision-making based on student recruitment and retainment, major enrollments, and endowment returns (Acheson, et al., 2016; Darder, 2012; Diao & Liu, 2021). The pervasive myth of monolingualism, expansive monocultural prejudice, and competing interests (Zeichner, 2010), as well as policies and practices at systems levels remain beyond the control of language programs (Aydarova, et al., 2024; Museus & Sasaki, 2021). Insistence that science and data alone drive the economy and not people or relationships conflicts with the essence of language programs, which foster intercultural, interpersonal communication, interdependence, and self-reflection (Darder, 2012; Diao & Liu, 2021).

As an individual department we do not have the ability to change the system, because systems cannot be controlled. We can, however, find places to intervene (Meadows, 2008) through practices such as systems modeling, documenting (Adams et al., 2021), and recasting language learning and teaching value as an economic value (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). These are all methods for faculty to challenge prevailing views (Aydarova et al. 2024; Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) and to respond agentically to working conditions (Li et al., 2023; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023). "People cannot resist, refuse or dismantle a system unless they know how it operates." (Adams et al., 2021, p. 145).

All systems have a hierarchy of elements and work in service to the higher elements. The system may implode or reconfigure itself regardless of how individual elements act to mitigate this. What this means for language programs faculty is that we need to keep our lens on the larger, macro level of higher education system's behavior as we find leverage points to intervene in the system, including our own self-organization (Meadows, 1999). The series of visualization exercises we engaged in may have helped the language department recognize several elements, interconnections, and aspects of individual actions within the systems behavior, but there are additional, meaningful steps to work through to manage and design resolutions to the challenges language teaching and learning face broadly across the US. In short, we need to work for change at a systems level rather than tinkering with an isolated course, program or department. We should be examining the system, not just discrete components (Swanson & Levine, 2020), which includes a closer examination of our labor.

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