

JUST SAY “NO”: EMPOWERING OURSELVES AND OUR EXPERTISE

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the work of academic instruction librarians happens in response to the requests of others. In order to do our work, we often depend on colleagues and stakeholders – be they faculty members, administrators, or students – to ask us to get involved. We receive e-mails inviting us to visit new student orientation sessions and phone calls inquiring if we could spend time speaking with capstone classes. By and large, we are happy to accommodate these requests. Librarians do good work, and these invitations often serve as verification that we are valued by our organizations.

Within this paradigm, however, librarians also need to be cognizant that we cannot be all things to all people. Saying “yes” to every request might please those seeking our help, but it comes at the expense of recognizing our own agency as professionals. In order to our best work, we instead need to be comfortable with sometimes saying “no.” It might seem like a simple enough concept, but refusing a request is something with which many librarians struggle. The purpose of this LOEX 2015 workshop was to empower librarians to recognize ourselves as experts in our field and provide us with strategies to say “no” in a way which will still lead to positive outcomes and improved student learning of information literacy skills.

WHY SHOULD WE SAY “NO”?

Librarians often receive requests from well-intentioned faculty for sessions that are predicated upon unspecified learning objectives, poorly designed library assignments, or outdated expectations of how a library session should be conducted. Too often, the presenters have heard our peers discuss feeling obligated to provide instruction that we know will be ineffectual, for fear that the course instructor will not work with us if we do not comply with their demands. This often leads to disappointing sessions – both for us and for the

students – and ultimately to dissatisfaction and burnout for librarians (Accardi, 2015).

Those of us who specialize in information literacy education are experts in teaching these concepts. We know the pedagogical best practices for our field. Attempting to cover everything about the library in one 50-minute session is not effective for several reasons. Cognitively, cramming too many learning outcomes into a single lesson will overload participants’ ability to process all of that information. Having time to actively apply the new knowledge in class, whether that means hands-on time in the database or time drawing a concept map on a white board, will increase the chance students will retain that new information. Many of these principles have been shared at conferences, taught at ACRL Immersion, and discussed in many other settings, to the point of seeming to be common knowledge among librarians who specialize in teaching information literacy.

At the same time, however, librarians seem to defer to the professors' requests, fearing that the professor will not welcome the librarian into that class if the librarian does not do exactly as asked. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, it is a disservice to the students, for whom we should be advocating. Second, it relies on negative assumptions about those disciplinary faculty. We should instead start with the assumption that those faculty members want to help their students become successful, and that they will want to learn how to incorporate information literacy more effectively. Doctoral students often report not receiving adequate training in how to teach effectively (Helm, Campa, & Moretto, 2012; Johnston, Milkman, & McCoy, 2013). Universities vary in the degree of support provided for faculty development in this area. For example, University of West Georgia just established a Center for Teaching and Learning with a full time Director in November 2013; before then, many faculty noted a significant lack of support for pedagogical training. Those who do receive training in effective pedagogy are often focused on methods to

teach their disciplinary content, not specifically focusing on information literacy. In our experiences, most faculty have been receptive to discussions about pedagogical reasons for taking a different approach than originally requested in order to achieve the learning outcome they want their students to achieve. The challenge for librarians is to open that conversation in a way that will lead to a productive conversation.

Another problem with saying "yes" to too many problematic requests is a matter of workload management. When we fill our time with poorly timed or ineffectively designed instruction sessions, when do we have the opportunity and energy to meaningfully engage faculty in dialog about integrating information literacy more effectively into their curriculum? In a study of occupational turnover among librarians and archivists, Rathbun-Grubb (2009) found that a common theme among those who are considering leaving or have left the field is a sense of being overworked. Filling our days with problematic instruction sessions means that we must either reduce the time we spend working on building cooperative relationships with faculty members to promote pedagogically sound information literacy education, or we must work more hours to fit that in around the problematic sessions.

From a more critical standpoint, saying "yes" to requests that we know are problematic is a form of silencing, abdicating our expertise and taking a subservient position in relation to a more powerful subject faculty member. In a recent blog post, Wallis (2015) has critiqued the various ways librarians are silenced and the ways librarians use silence to negotiate power dynamics. The author goes on to outline the ways that silence is often read by faculty and students, perpetuating the notion that we may be cheerful helpers, but not real teachers. Though this post was published after our LOEX workshop, it resonates deeply with our reasons for proposing this interactive session in the first place. Our goal was to encourage resistance to this sort of professional silencing, and to support librarians in developing strategies to productively empower our expertise in order to become more effective partners in educating students.

HOW TO SAY "NO"

Using a word like "no" has the ability to end conversations faster than we would often like. With that in mind, it should be stressed that the point of this strategy is not to end conversations, but rather, to begin them. Skene (2004) advises against saying "I can't" or "I won't." This is a place where linguistic hedging can be a productive strategy. When saying "no," librarians should follow that response with words and phrases like "but..." or "because...", or replace it altogether with "how about...?" In this way, a misguided request from a faculty member could become the start of a conversation into what the library prioritizes, and allow the librarian to demonstrate their expertise with regards to pedagogical practice and information literacy.

Specific strategies for saying no should be tailored to the specific request and person – what works for one library or

department might not work for another. The most fundamental and flexible strategy, however, is to plan ahead: thinking through possible responses to problematic requests can help prevent us from being caught off guard. Likewise, it can be helpful to practice explaining the pedagogical reasons for suggesting meeting at a different point in the semester, or preparing a more appropriate lesson plan for a session. Going beyond these steps, actually role-playing common scenarios with library colleagues will improve our ability to voice these responses and answer possible objections. (A list of common problematic requests from faculty is included as Appendix A, though individual libraries could likely brainstorm additional scenarios with which to practice.)

A strategy that came up in several groups during the interactive session at LOEX 2015 was to establish policies, particularly to respond to prompts like requests for sessions when the professor will be absent or requests to use library classrooms for non-library purposes. The presenters have mixed views on this tactic. Policies imposed by administrators or kept without revision for too long can be problematic. Likewise, simply saying "that's against our policy" can feel like a cop-out. Instead, instruction policies can and should be based on pedagogical practice and learning theory, which signifies our commitment to, and knowledge of, effective teaching. Likewise, if done well, developing policies collaboratively within a department provides a space to think through ways to respond to various requests in advance, rather than being put on the spot later. Each member of that department will then know the reasons for saying no to certain requests, and perhaps more importantly, know that they have the support of their supervisor and colleagues when they deny a request.

One workshop participant suggested using a policy for leverage: "If you [the professor] will work with me to make this session pedagogically meaningful, then I will make an exception to the policy." This can provide an incentive for professors to incorporate information literacy more effectively into their course planning and meet the librarian halfway. Another strategy discussed in the workshop was to view the request as a reference question – what the person is asking for may not be exactly what they really need. This idea arose in response to the prompt asking participants to respond to a request from their library administration: "We need to increase our instruction statistics... Why don't you start offering a weekly, drop-in tour?" This was included to highlight the ways that administrators do not always understand best practices for information literacy education. Instead of saying "no, that won't be effective," asking why they need us to increase our statistics might open an opportunity to brainstorm more pedagogically effective ways to address the core issue. Viewing the request as a reference question may make it easier for some to feel comfortable getting past the initial request to negotiate to a better arrangement.

REFLECTING ON SAYING "NO"

Librarianship is still very much viewed as a service profession, both by those working within the field as well as our

campus colleagues. For that reason, it is common to feel awkward or uncooperative when refusing a request for a service. Surprisingly, however, the audience for this session did not report feeling that way. This is likely due to selection bias, as those who chose to attend the session were already inclined to refuse problematic requests.

For many of us, the need to say no extends beyond the realm of problematic requests from faculty to “talk about the library.” As members of our campus communities, we are often faced with requests which go well beyond our role in teaching students and reflect our sometimes reduced standing on campus. Common frustrations include expectations to serve on an excessive number of committees, as well as being selected as the default recorder of minutes, as “librarians are so organized and good at keeping records.” While this session focused on issues of pedagogy, becoming more proficient in saying no to problematic requests from faculty can increase our confidence and enable us to develop strategies to manage our workload in general. At some point, librarians must stop agreeing to everything in order to “keep your sanity and your health” (Skene, 2004).

CONCLUSION: GETTING TO “YES”

The important thing to remember is that the objective of saying “no” is not to be obstructionist or contrarian. Effective information literacy instruction programs rely on cooperation across campus, and if librarians are to do our best work, we will need to form meaningful partnerships with our colleagues in other departments (Meulemans & Carr, 2013). As Wallis (2015) noted, however, “coming out of silence” is not always easy. It can lead to pushback, though we hope that the strategies discussed in this workshop will help to mitigate that. Gathering as much support as possible is important. Discussing these issues and the strategies we plan to implement with our supervisors is an important part of the process, so that we know we will have support from those higher in the library hierarchy. Developing a support network among peers can also be incredibly helpful, in order to share strategies and perhaps share testimonials from professors who have worked with our colleagues and observed improvements in student work after taking the librarian's advice. In the end, we do want to say “yes!”, but only to those requests which are the meaningful to us, our institutions, and most importantly, our students.

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APPENDIX A

Common Problematic Requests from Faculty Members

- “Could you proctor my exam tonight? Just, you know, take attendance, pass the test out, collect the blue books, then return them to my department’s office?”
- “I’m going to a conference next week. Could you come to my class and talk about databases? They don’t have an assignment, but I figured hearing you couldn’t hurt.”
- “Could you show my students how to find print journal articles? I know most of this stuff is online, but I really want them to experience the pain of doing research.”
- “I was scheduled in classroom that I don’t like. Can’t I just use the library’s instruction room for this semester?”
- “Could you please explain to my students how important MLA Citation is going to be after they graduate?”
- “I’d like to bring my class to the library for the first day of the semester. Better get them started on research before Drop/Add is even over!”
- “I’m going to let you finish, but I’m interrupting your presentation to my class to tell you, to tell them, that Wikipedia is useless.”
- “Could you teach my students how to research? You know, just, like, everything in the library?”
- “I’ve told my class of 120 they need to schedule an appointment with you this week. Could you email me the names of every student with whom you meet? And tell me what you two talked about?”