



2014

Vignette: Clear communication and when to say "no"

Kathleen Langan

Western Michigan University, kathleen.langan@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/library_pubs



Part of the Information Literacy Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Langan, Kathleen, "Vignette: Clear communication and when to say "no"" (2014). *University Libraries Faculty & Staff Publications*. 32.

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/library_pubs/32

This Contribution to a book is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty & Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Ideally, your program should have some instruction policies in place to support your “no.” Policies may be both written and unwritten. On paper, such a policy will require instructors to attend library sessions and *actively participate*. Course instructors should reinforce the importance of information literacy skills; and more practically, the course instructor needs to know what you did in class in order to point students back to those skills and resources as they progress on their projects. If your professor tells you that he or she cannot come to the session, firmly explain your policy and its rationale, and request that the session be rescheduled for a time when the professor can be there. If rescheduling isn’t possible (*dire* emergencies only), ask that the class be accompanied by someone else from the department. Use this backup method sparingly, or you will encourage repeat offenders.



VIGNETTE: CLEAR COMMUNICATION (AND WHY TO SAY NO)

—Kate Langan, Assistant Professor, Humanities Librarian,
Western Michigan University

The first semester that I started at Western Michigan University as the humanities librarian, I jumped in feet first and grabbed as many classes as possible. Most of them were integrated with the general education writing classes. Much to my surprise, the research assignments for these writing classes varied widely. I quickly realized that I needed to get detailed assignment information from the instructors in order to plan the sessions. However, I was wishy-washy and did not enforce my requests. Luckily, the majority of the classes went smoothly. I received the assignments and started to prep from there.

My approach quickly changed a few weeks into the semester. I was scheduled to teach a class on a Tuesday, but by Monday evening, I still had not heard from the instructor. I did not think twice about it. How bad could it be? It did not occur to me to say “No.” On Tuesday morning, I met the students in the classroom. The instructor belatedly handed me two pages describing the assignment: to research the parts

of an object and write a paper describing its history, tracing its fabrication from cradle to grave. I didn't even know where to begin.

I found myself in a classroom with ten students, varying objects in hand. Someone had a trophy; others had a baseball, a deck of cards, a plaque, a color photograph. The students had already written about their emotional connection to the object. Now they were to write an impartial, physical description of the piece. Without lead time, I completely misunderstood the assignment. It wasn't until twenty minutes into the class that I grasped the topic. I couldn't point them to useful information resources. It was a waste of time. I looked bad, and the students were bored.

I've since changed my approach to teaching in many ways. I will not teach without a copy of the assignment, syllabus, or a list of learning outcomes. The information literacy program is highly visible. In fact, it is a priority. The most important lesson I learned is that of communication. Every teaching librarian needs to communicate with faculty before teaching a class. But the conversation also needs to become department-wide. I became visible in the department, made contacts with coordinators and chairs. I started attending departmental meetings. When the English writing program was hiring a new coordinator, the English Department listened to my input. Now, when I ask for materials to assist in teaching, I get a quick response. Communication has allowed me to become an esteemed teaching resource for the department. With support from the faculty thanks to good communication, I have been able to develop stronger teaching assignments and know when to say "No." Everybody wins.

Avoid "milk and spinach"¹ sessions. In other words, if the instructor wants to bring the class to the library because it is good for them, but doesn't have a research assignment or other curricular tie-in, politely decline. Even library tours for first-year study skills classes should be connected to specific course-related learning goals. If students don't see an immediate and practical application to the library session, they won't be engaged and will quickly become indifferent to the idea of information literacy instruction.

Sometimes you have to be bold. Despite the care you put into the instruction interview and follow-up conversations, there will still be