

Signs, Signs, Signs: Rethinking Information Access in a High School Library

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You come to know the signs. A class comes to choose books for independent reading but a student hangs back, hugs the wall, and sidles away from the book shelves. When pressed by their teacher you overhear, "I can't check out any books...I have overdues from middle school...I lost a book one time...there's a note on my account, etc." Or a transfer student comes in every morning and finally works up the courage to ask how much it costs to print, behind in homework without a printer at home and worried about the potential cost.

At our school, we do not have overdue fines, printing is free, we allow students with lost or overdue items to check out in most cases and we work with them to return or replace books owed to other local libraries. But how do students know this? Most (but not all) freshmen English classes come for a library orientation and these topics are generally covered. But this is hardly a comprehensive approach to communicate our policies. An archived *School Library Journal* webinar, "Your Library on Steroids: Make an Impact on System-Level Priorities" (August 27, 2018), contained a section on access and equity that prompted me to reflect on whether our library policies served adults or students, which led to a larger question; how many students avoid or do not take advantage the library because they do not know our access policies and may be too intimidated to ask in person?

On the most basic level these policies need to be visible and ours were not. Even if our policies are designed to break down barriers of access, not promoting them renders them ineffective. We reflected on the most basic purpose of our signs and the message, if any, we were sending by what students saw on the walls. Taking a step back and considering the basic question of our signage's intent proved highly instructive. What follows is a brief history of our library signage concluding with our most recent trend towards infographics.

Flyers under Lock and Key

Signage has come a long way in the past eight years in our library beginning with the original locked wooden cases. These cases did not send a particularly positive message, other than "we locked these up because we do not trust you." They also limited the size of information that could be displayed and made it difficult to provide attractive signage in an ADA-compliant font size.

Return of the READ Posters

There followed an initiative to promote ALA READ posters. While staff enjoyed the opportunity to showcase their favorite books, a preponderance of READ poster began to feel like an exhortation and perhaps overemphasized the library as only a place to check out books. What initially seemed encouraging, at a certain limit, seemed to scold more than inspire.

Motivational Signs

The number of READ posters decreased and were replaced in the past three years by motivational quotes and calming images. These were selected by library staff to be uplifting to students as well as to be more decorative. But, what did they say about the library? Anecdotally we found that while adults in the building thought they were attractive, signs telling students to "Find Joy in the Journey," etc., simply filled up wall space and did not reflect any actual philosophy of the library.

Informational and Infographic

The popularity and increased use of infographics and availability of web-based providers such as Canva and Piktochart have revamped the library's current approach to signage. Our realization that some very positive and foundational library policies were not reflected in the library itself has drastically changed our approach to signage. We brainstormed the questions we repeatedly get asked by students, staff, and visitors and tried to address those in new less text-heavy signs. Our rule has been that the information should be more "what you can do" than "what you can't do" related to the library.

Likewise, signs and instructions that truly are in place to keep resources and equipment from being lost or misused don't have to be patronizing or accusatory. When laptops replaced desktops as our OPACs, there was a concern that students might unplug and use them elsewhere. Instead of using signs to the effect of "Do Not Move This Laptop, It Must Stay Here!" clipart was used alongside more positive wording: "Thanks for Making Sure This Laptop Doesn't Walk Away."

It is often said that 65% of people are visual learners. Young adults especially tend to be highly visual, attracted to images far more than text. We have found that providing information in this fashion has empowered our students to understand library policies and better take full advantage of our resources. Our supply stations are a very recent addition to the library, an outgrowth of questioning what students most often ask for in terms of supplies. We repurposed our atlas stands as supply stations and hung infographics explaining their use them. With no announcement or fanfare, students began using them straight away without having to approach the desks and ask permission.

It may often be the case that policies and procedures are used to control an environment. Yet, they can be just as likely to protect the user, *if* the user is aware of

them. As social entrepreneur Sharad Vivek Sagar said, "For too long, information, opportunities, and resources have been constraints, they need to be the bridges." Approachable, informational signs might help build those bridges.



DeGroft, Lee. "Signs, Signs, Signs: Rethinking Information Access in a High School Library." *School Library Connection*. (April 2020). schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2241834.