Team-teaching: The Expanding Role of Business Reference Librarians

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The value of team-teaching has been demonstrated in a number of studies in the past ten years. Its potential for the development of student research skills is tremendous since it goes beyond the small window of instruction time that reference librarians generally have with students. Not only does team-teaching offer an in-depth learning experience in a specific subject area, it also offers the type of feedback that librarians are interested in obtaining: What are students actually learning? How are they applying it?

According to the research, reference librarians are engaged in team-teaching, but little is known about the extent to which this is occurring, particularly in specialized areas such as business reference. Collaboration between reference librarians and faculty might take one of several different forms:

- Short-term limited involvement such as provision of the ubiquitous one-shot class offered as part of a business management course (Ellis and Beck, 2003);
- Participation in the development of a faculty member's online courses, including acting as an "embedded" librarian for student consultation (Kinnie, 2006);
- Participation as a team-teacher with business faculty during a semester-long reference plus application course (Ellis and Beck, 2003); and
- Coordination across disciplines with two or more faculty (Feeney and Martin, 2003; Boudreau and Bicknell-Holmes, 2004).

Despite evidence of practice and interest, there are no statistics indicating the current number of courses that are team-taught by a business reference librarian and a business faculty member. Likewise, there has been very little written about the nature of such courses. A review of the literature found no information on the trend towards increased levels of collaboration either. At the institutional level, administration may not even know that this is going on. Arrangements can be made between faculty and librarians, with no mention made outside of their respective departments.

The current research examines the extent of business reference librarian involvement in teaching research methods to business graduate and undergraduate students, perceived trends in team-teaching, and the current extent of team-teaching at academic institutions. The research questions of interest revolve around three areas: awareness, interest, and types of collaboration and rationale.

METHOD

A two-pronged strategy was designed in order to assess the trends in team-teaching among business reference librarians. In the first phase, a brief questionnaire was used, and in the second, one-on-one interviews with librarians, business faculty, and business school and library administrators will be conducted to expand upon questionnaire findings during April, 2010.

Questionnaire

An exploratory survey of 10 questions (nine close-ended, one open) directed at academic librarians was conducted to determine the level of awareness and interest in team-teaching among business reference librarians and business faculty, and to identify the types of collaboration already in place. A message requesting participation was sent to all members of the Business Librarianship in North Carolina (BLINC) group via their closed-membership list serve. This was followed by a request sent to members of BUSLIB-L, The Business Librarians E-mail Discussion Group, which is subscribed by about 2,000 librarians who work with business information sources in all types of libraries (i.e., public, academic, corporate, government, nonprofit, and consortia) across the globe. Respondents were directed to the linked survey. There were 94 responses which included 60 percent of the total BLINC membership numbering 77 business reference librarians.

Interviews

A series of planned interviews will further examine awareness and interest in team-teaching, as well as types of collaboration. The interviews will provide a means of identifying rationales for particular types of collaboration as well as assessing the conditions necessary for success. This part of the study will allow for expansion on these topics by a subset of the previous respondents.

The interview sample will include three business reference librarians, three business faculty, and three administrators each from business schools and academic libraries. Each respondent will be asked a set of open-ended questions covering the three areas of research questions. These responses will be summarized and matched with survey questions in order to broaden and refine the findings of the exploratory survey.

Preliminary Findings

Closed question results were tabulated by response frequency using an open-source provider. Responses to the open-ended questions were summarized according to their relevancy for identifying awareness, interest, or collaboration and rationale areas. Responses to open-ended questions provided additional explanation for the responses to close-ended questions. With these findings, the planned interviews were designed to focus on more specific issues related to the original questions.

Awareness and Interest Areas

- One-quarter of the respondents noticed more interest in team teaching with business faculty in the professional literature;
- Two thirds have had an increase in requests to teach specialized reference courses for undergraduate business students;
- One-half have had an increase in requests to teach specialized reference courses for graduate business students;
- One-tenth have had an increase in requests to team-teach courses with faculty;
- Less than one–tenth have written or co-authored books or other texts with business faculty.

Collaboration and Rationale

- Respondents who were not involved in team-teaching cited lack of resources as the reason.
- Respondents who were involved in team-teaching cited the necessity for strong faculty-member interest and job flexibility.

While business reference librarians are aware of a trend towards team-teaching, the practice is not widespread at this time.

Despite the benefits of team-teaching, respondents had not approached business faculty with an offer to team-teach, nor had the reverse occurred. The most frequent reason for this was the lack of resources, lack of faculty interest, and in some cases, lack of interest among library administrators. The interview findings proposed for presentation will help us to understand how team-teaching relationships develop and what conditions will encourage the practice. Given the respondents were primarily employed in North Carolina, further research using a broader population would allow us to more fully understand and compare current findings. This study has implications for reference librarians interested in collaboration and teaching, and for LIS educators who prepare students for such activities. Team-teaching speaks to the evolving role of librarians as active, engaged members of their communities: it heeds Wiegand's (1999) call to re-examine librarianship and its significance to users.

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