

Embedded Librarianship at the University of Michigan's Business Library

Introduction

Much has been written about embedded librarianship in many different types of libraries ranging from the academic library to special library environment, and there are many different models of embedded librarianship; several of these are highlighted in an introduction to a special *Information Outlook* issue on the subject published in early 2010 (Shumaker, 10). One model involves librarians working outside their own offices and instead working inside the offices/environments in which the patrons they support spend the majority of their time; this model is often seen in academic libraries. A second model involves librarians being part of a team working to develop a new product or service; this model is often seen in special libraries. According to Shumaker, despite the differences in embedded librarianship models, "one common thread emerges: embedded librarianship involves the delivery of highly customized and highly valued information and knowledge services to a customer group with well-defined needs" (p. 11). The Kresge Business Administration Library at the University of Michigan's Stephen M. Ross School of Business is unique in that it uses the second model of embedded librarianship, typically used in a special library setting, in an academic setting instead. However, even though Kresge's hybrid academic/special library model of embedded librarianship is unique, it still meets the definition of Shumaker's "one common thread" emerging from the differences in embedded librarianship.

Action-Based Learning at the Ross School of Business

The Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan provides a great deal of traditional business instruction in an academic, case-based format, but also requires that all of its full-time MBA (master's of business administration) students (as well as several other student cohort groups) participate in action-based learning. Action-based learning is a combination of project-based learning and action learning. "Project-based learning refers to the theory and practice of utilizing real-world work assignments on time-limited projects to achieve mandated performance objectives and to facilitate individual and collection learning" while action learning "assumes that people learn most effectively when working on real-time problems that occur in their own work setting" (DeFillippi, 5). The Ross School calls the main component of its action-based learning program "Multi-Disciplinary Action Projects," or MAP. In MAP, business school students act as consultants to actual companies on real business projects. This opportunity gives the students real world experience that they may not obtain even through summer internships, and it is one of the reasons why a potential MBA student would choose to attend Michigan instead of one of its competing schools.

The business school receives MAP project proposals from a wide variety of organizations including for-profits, non-profits, small corporations, Fortune 500 companies, and even international entities. Organizations represented by MAP projects over the past few years have included: a firm constructing "modular elevators," a casino, a children's museum, an international airport, a Middle Eastern logistics company, a professional football team, a company managing an entertainment venue, an online dating company, an auto company, and even the Ross School of Business itself.

After receiving the project proposals, MAP program administrators finalize a set of projects with which the students will be engaged. Nearly five hundred first year MBA students then bid on these projects, and between five and six students are assigned to each team, with a result of nearly one hundred project teams.

By the time they are involved with MAP in the second half of the spring semester of their first year in the MBA program, students will have spent just twenty-one weeks taking “core” courses in accounting, economics, finance, marketing, operations, organizational development, statistics, and strategy – not even a full year of business instruction. This, combined with the fact that some business school students have just a couple of years of actual business experience, means that they are somewhat less experienced heading into MAP than second year MBA students or professionals already working in the profession would be. In addition, MAP students often work with the company involved with the MAP project to not only solve a business “problem,” but also define what that problem is. In other words, MAP students often enter their projects with a great deal of uncertainty.

MAP and Kresge Library

Due to the uncertainty students face while working on MAP projects, the Ross School has instituted several measures to ensure that they are successful. Each MAP team is assigned a faculty liaison, a communications coach to assist with dynamics and communication within the team, and a librarian. Kresge librarians are given descriptions of the various MAP projects they use to choose the teams with which they are interested in working; the librarians don’t use any formal process to distribute the MAP projects among themselves, but they do often take projects from companies whose projects they have worked on in the past. Each librarian works with from eight to sixteen teams, depending on what other responsibilities he or she has. (This year, for example, the systems librarian worked with a smaller number of teams because he also worked on a project to upgrade the library’s servers.)

After distributing the projects among themselves, the librarians use the project descriptions to brief themselves on what the projects are like, begin to strategize about the library resources that will best support each team’s work on its project, and reach out to the teams (usually via email) to schedule initial meetings with them, preferably after they have met with their sponsoring organization. Although students working on MAP projects have already been taking classes at the business school for a semester and a half, MAP is often their first expensive experience using the library’s resources. Because of this, each librarian’s initial meeting with a MAP project team can be quite extensive as he or she works with the students to put together a list of resources that will be of the most help with their projects, based on his or her review of the project description and the students’ own review of what they already know about the project.

Since MAP projects can be undefined, since the questions the students encounter during the projects are often quite complex, and since there is a very tight deadline for the projects (seven weeks), the librarians not only conduct these initial meetings with MAP students, they also act as resource and reference guides for them throughout the course of their projects. Because each librarian works with several different MAP teams, the librarians have collectively come up with some general

guidelines for the team to ensure that the MAP experience for both parties will be successful. Each MAP team is encouraged to designate one person as its “library liaison” and run all its information questions through this person so that the librarian working with the team isn’t receiving the same information request from multiple members of the team. Each team is also encouraged to include its name and team number in the subject line of any email it sends its librarian. The MAP team and its librarian also agree on the best means of sharing information, whether by email or by the University of Michigan’s cTools course management system. Librarians also attempt to manage the expectations of members of their MAP teams, explaining to the team that they have multiple MAP teams and setting a time frame within which they will respond to contacts from the team. Finally, librarians use MAP as an opportunity to provide some instruction in information literacy to the business school students, teaching them the value of information through discussions about why and why not the library subscribes to individual information resources depending on their availability and cost.

Some of the questions encountered during MAP are very different than those countered during the average traditional reference desk shift:

- How is media consumed in the Philippines?
- Is there any data about the effectiveness of free sampling on a product launch?
- How do performers’ opportunities to perform at the Super Bowl affect their popularity or the demand for their concerts?
- To what extent does introducing children to philanthropy at an early age lead to their affinity for charities and donations as they get older?
- Does varying the color scheme for a brand of products result in more sales for that brand than does keeping the color scheme the same across the entire brand?

After an intensive seven weeks each student team completes its MAP project and presents its findings to the project’s sponsors, usually the organization’s board of directors. In some cases, the team’s librarian is even invited to the presentation.

MAP’s Impact on Kresge Library

MAP has impacted Kresge Library in a number of ways, including its staffing and service model; its interaction with students; the expertise of its staff members; and the resources which it licenses and acquires. Kresge Library has eight librarians on staff, a large number considering the relatively small size of the student body at the business school, but all eight librarians are busy throughout the school year, and especially during the spring months of MAP season, assisting students working on action-based learning projects. While some academic business librarians’ main interaction with students is through instruction sessions, librarians at Kresge Library work most closely with students in connection with their action-based learning projects. In fact, librarians working with action based learning teams have their regular reference desk hours significantly

reduced so that they can focus on MAP; the library utilizes student interns from Michigan's School of Information to fill in the resulting gaps at the reference desk.

Kresge librarians' interaction with students working on action-based learning projects is not limited to traditional two year full-time MBA students. Since the introduction of MAP to this student group two decades ago, the Ross School of Business has expanded MAP and other action-based learning activities to its other programs. Students enrolled in the Executive, Global, Part-Time Evening, and Part-Time Weekend MBA programs now all participate in MAP. The Ross School has also added an elective, Strategy 659: Global Field Project II, that is essentially a "MAP 2" course. Institutes within the school, such as the Tauber Institute for Global Operations, also engage students in other forms of action-based learning. Finally, in 2010, the School began introducing the concept of action-based learning to its undergraduate population through the Summer Action Learning Program in Consulting (ALPS) (Holdship, 6). The library provides reference and research services to these other programs in much the same way it does for the traditional two year, daytime MBA MAP program, and while the busiest time of the year for librarians at Kresge Library is still March and April, the "traditional" MAP season, they are actively involved in supporting teams from these other action-based learning programs throughout most of the calendar year. In addition, students with whom librarians have worked on MAP projects tend not to forget "their" librarians, often following up with the librarian who assisted them with their MAP project – or other librarians at Kresge Library – for assistance on other research projects in the second year of their MBA program at Michigan.

In addition to keeping Kresge Library reference librarians busy throughout "MAP season" and other times of the year, action based learning programs at the business school have impacted the library in several other ways. Although the questions received by the Librarians during MAP vary widely, the industries (and sometimes individual firms) represented by the projects are repeated enough that a number of librarians have become "experts" in one or more specific industries or firms. They are encouraged to select MAP projects dealing with similar industries or firms in subsequent years. For example, one librarian at Kresge has become the go-to person for information on medical devices. The library also utilizes Numara Software's Footprints tool to record questions (and answers) it receives from students at the business school including those working on MAP projects, and has customized the tool so that questions received from MAP projects can be identified as such. This represents another method used by the library to build its knowledge base.

The library has not only been able to use MAP to build its knowledge base on specific industries and firms, it has been also been able to use MAP to refine its collection of information resources to support students working on MAP projects, initiating subscriptions to a couple of unique databases that go beyond the usual industry reports and company overviews. These include Global Data's Medical eTrack product which has sales and volume projections for specific types of medical devices; Frost & Sullivan which provides extensive market research on specific industrial segments; and Forrester, which provides data on the information technology industry, specifically consumer IT such as social networking.

MAP Challenges & Opportunities

MAP has presented Kresge Library with several challenges and opportunities. Despite the unique characteristics of MAP, the students working on these action-based learning projects are like many other students in that they often venture beyond the library's set of resources to search Google for information. This is particularly problematic for librarians working with action-based learning teams because one type of information that is extremely well represented on the Internet is market research. Anyone with an expertise in a particular industry can write a report on that industry and sell it online. Market research vendors include those selling one-off reports; those selling a dozen reports on a particular industry in which they are an expert; and those acting as report aggregators/resellers which list thousands of reports from hundreds of different vendors. These reports are all easily identifiable with a Google search and students often approach the library with requests for them, even though they often cost several thousand dollars. The librarians usually take advantage of these requests to conduct reference interviews to determine what the students are *really* looking for and in some cases can identify resources that the library already licenses that can help the students with their questions. At other times, however, the questions the students are trying to answer are so specific to the industry in which they are working that they feel the report they have identified via Google is the only answer to their question. In the past, the library has had a small fund to purchase market research reports for these requests but due to their expense and a reduction in the library's budget it had to end this practice.

Regardless of whether this type of industry specific information is already licensed by the library or specially purchased for students, students have to be encouraged not to share it with their project sponsors, as this would violate the terms of the licenses the library has signed with the vendors providing the information. (The project sponsors represent additional potential customers for the library's vendors.) At times, the project sponsors have encouraged the students to obtain market research reports and the library has responded by requiring the students to ask their sponsors to purchase the data. Students are sometimes reluctant to do this because they fear angering their sponsors who may be potential employers, and because some of the sponsors are non-profits who can't afford the research.

Another problematic area encountered in supporting action-based learning and MAP is the fact that many of the project teams (including the Tauber and projects) consist of students both inside and outside the business school. Not all of the business library's resources, especially some of the databases focused on specific industries, are available to students across campus due to license restrictions, so some team members may be able to access the data while others cannot. In some cases, students not normally part of the business school but working on projects related to academic programs within the business school can receive clearance to use business library databases.

On the other hand, this work with MAP teams has enabled the business librarians to recognize the importance of building relationships with other librarians across the University of Michigan campus. Despite Kresge Library's status at UM as an "independent library" outside the management structure of the main University Library – Kresge's reporting line is through the business school – it has utilized the expertise of librarians at the Taubman Health Sciences Library

and Arts, Architecture & Engineering Library on campus for help answering questions related to MAP projects. Kresge Library has built on these contacts to further explore collaboration with those libraries. In fact, this past winter, the business, health sciences, and engineering libraries recently completed a series of “cross-training” workshops to share with librarians from the three libraries information about resources that might be of interest to all three disciplines.

Conclusion

Although action-based learning is not unique to the Ross School of Business (the College of Business at the University of Illinois has a similar program), its centrality to the school is such that it has had a great impact on Kresge Library. This impact includes the size of the library’s staff, the types of interactions it has with students, and the types of resources it licenses for use. Librarians working at Kresge truly are embedded as they work with student action-based learning project teams; in this respect, they are not only working in a specialized subject area – business – but are working in a library that bridges the gap between academic and special libraries.

References

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