

Cross-Institutional Peer Observation for Business Librarians

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Introduction

In January of 2020, business librarians at Okanagan College and the University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus participated in a cross-institutional peer observation program for library instruction. Both librarians are located in Kelowna, British Columbia. Each librarian has participated in peer observation programs at their institutions, with colleagues in liaison areas in other subjects. This article will explore the process, benefits and challenges in taking business information literacy instruction peer observation outside of your own library.

Background of institutions and libraries

Okanagan College

Okanagan College is the only publicly funded college in the Okanagan region, and provides credentials ranging from certificates to post-baccalaureate diplomas on four campuses. Seven librarians work at the largest campus in Kelowna, with one librarian at each of the smaller centers. Librarians at the College each serve liaison roles, and in Kelowna have functional roles in either technical services or public services. The Business Librarian is the only librarian to have their liaison area explicit in their job description and title, due to the size and breadth of the business program.

The Okanagan School of Business (OSB) at Okanagan College offers one of two bachelor degrees available at the College, with over 2000 students enrolled in 2018 (Okanagan College Institutional Research, 2018). Students obtaining a Bachelor of Business Administration degree have options to specialize in accounting, finance, human resources management, management, marketing, and tourism and hospitality. The OSB also offers two-year diplomas, certificate programs and post-baccalaureate diplomas in business. Students can complete the first two years of the degree program in Vernon, Penticton, and Salmon Arm, and all four years in Kelowna (Okanagan College, 2019). Over 70% of students attend the Kelowna campus.

University of British Columbia

The University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus (UBCO) is located in Kelowna, British Columbia - its larger campus is situated in Vancouver, approximately a 4-hour drive away. This campus is only 15 years old and has close to 11,000 students in undergraduate and graduate degree programs. UBC Okanagan Library employs 10 librarians, who also may work in combined liaison and functional roles. In Vancouver, a dedicated management research library has three librarians, and the Irving K. Barber Research Centre has a Community Engagement

Librarian for Business Services. In Kelowna, the Faculty of Management Librarian is embedded in the faculty.

The Faculty of Management offers a four-year Bachelor of Management, and a two-year, blended delivery Master of Management. The Faculty of Commerce on UBC's Vancouver campus offers bachelor and graduate-level programs in Commerce and Business Administration. The Okanagan campus also offers interdisciplinary graduate studies within themed areas, at the Master's and PhD levels. Faculty enrollment was 973 (undergraduate and graduate) for the winter 2019-20 session (UBC PAIR, 2019a). Bachelor of Management students may choose to focus on accounting, entrepreneurial technology, finance, human resources, marketing, sustainability, and operations/supply chain management. The program also offers opportunities to complete a minor in Computer Science, Cultural Studies, Economics, Sociology, or Psychology (UBC Faculty of Management, n.d.).

Demographics and class size

Class sizes in the business program at Okanagan College range from a maximum of 45 students in first-year required courses, to a minimum of five students in the fourth-year honors research class (Okanagan College, n.d.). The average age of students in the business program is 24, with over 25% international students (IR, 2018).

UBC Faculty of Management class sizes can vary depending on whether or not they are required courses, and on the delivery format. For example, one first-year required course this year was 275 students for the lecture class, with tutorial sections of 40 students each, while another had three sections of 80 students. Upper level non-required courses can range from 50-70 students to 150 or more (UBC Student Service Centre, 2020). The average age of undergraduates at UBCO for 2019/20 is 20. Twenty percent of the Okanagan campus population are international students, and 34% are Management faculty (UBC PAIR, 2019b).

Liaison librarian roles and instruction overview

Lindsay Willson is the Liaison Librarian at Okanagan College for the OSB as well as Economics and Continuing Studies programs, however most of her teaching and research assistance is concentrated on business students due to the size of the program. On average she teaches between 45-60 information literacy sessions per academic year, with many multiple sessions for the first-year required Principles of Management course and the second-year Entrepreneurship course, although she also provides advanced research workshops for third- and fourth-year classes in tourism, international trade, and honors projects.

Kim Buschert is the Faculty of Management Librarian at UBCO. She teaches an average of 12 information literacy classes to Management students per year. She also participates in the Library's first-year English instruction program. Sessions taught tend to be in the same classes, year over year, including Introduction to Business, Introduction to Management Thought and Social Responsibility, Introduction to Marketing, Introduction to Management Communications,

Industry Analysis Project, and Operations Management for undergraduates; and sessions for Master of Management students during their annual two-week intensive.

Development of cross-institutional peer observation

Both institutions have had peer observation processes in recent years. At the College, a pilot peer-observation project was implemented in 2017 over two terms, with librarians in groups of two or three observing each other and providing feedback. No formal rules were implemented; however, everyone was encouraged to follow general practices, such as meeting prior to the class to discuss goals and priorities; using one of several rubrics to help with observations; and providing feedback after the session. Although the process was valuable, because of competing priorities and changing roles, librarians at the College did not keep up the process.

At the University, the peer-observation program has been in place since fall of 2018. Librarians are paired and conduct observations over one term. The librarians determine and share their goals for the sessions, and provide feedback. Documentation crafted by the Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian guides the process for planning, observing, and giving and receiving feedback. A debriefing session held after the first year indicated that librarians wanted to continue the program.

In the fall of 2019 the Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian at UBC Okanagan, Sajni Lacey, organized a Community of Practice with colleagues at UBCO and Okanagan College where librarians discussed the concept of a cross-institutional peer observation program. Librarians at both institutions were enthusiastic. Interested librarians entered their names and liaison areas into a form, from which the Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian at UBCO partnered together interested peers by liaison/related fields or specific aspects of teaching practice. For business librarians at the College and University, a cross-institutional program offered a unique opportunity to observe another librarian teaching a class in the same subject area, as both are the sole librarians for business at the campuses.

Our process

We discussed the classes we were teaching over email early in the winter term of 2020, with each of us providing a description of the classes we were scheduled to teach and what we were planning for each class, and arranged to visit the other institution at the appropriate time. Our pre-observation 'meeting' was by email, in which we elaborated on the courses we wanted observed, our lesson plans, and what we hoped to gain from peer feedback. The observations took place in the second week of January 2020. We met soon after both observations to provide feedback while the classes were still fresh.

Kim observed Lindsay teaching a first-year course where types of sources and searching using the discovery layer were the focus. Lindsay observed Kim in a second-year course focusing on industry analysis sources and searching techniques.

Through our planning discussion, we found that we were both interested in improving similar instructional skills, such as engaging students in interactive discussions and ensuring learning through in-class activities. We also recognized that although the content and sizes of the courses would be different, we would still be able to generally apply our learning.

Benefits

In our experience, cross-institutional peer observation programs for librarians at institutions where they are the sole librarian in their liaison area provides the unique opportunity for feedback from peers who teach the same or similar content. While all library instruction programs facilitate student learning of core information literacy concepts and practices, business research competencies diverge in the use of specialized databases and sources and for many types of research do not rely on the academic sources used by other disciplines¹.

The opportunity to both evaluate a peer and receive feedback allows liaison librarians to learn new instructional techniques, and reflect on, expand, or affirm their own practices. To be clear, we found that these benefits extend to both the observer and the recipient; observing someone else teach can inform one's practice as much as receiving feedback from an observer.

This program also allowed us to develop a collegial relationship with a business librarian in the same community. Prior to this year, we had known of each other through our provincial business librarians' community of practice, and through our local librarians' community, but had not taken the time to connect and chat about our work.

Challenges

A few potential challenges for implementing a cross-institutional peer observation program might be encountered. However, these are not necessarily different from those of in-house peer observation.

- Having a colleague with whom you work closely observe you teach can be daunting. Being observed by a colleague you do not work with may therefore add an additional layer of perceived vulnerability. Ensuring you are on the same page through planning in advance and following guidelines on how feedback should best be delivered will be reassuring.
- Scheduling sessions and finding time to plan and debrief is always a challenge during the academic year; it can be difficult to find a time that works for both participants to observe the selected sessions. Adding in travel between institutions might exacerbate this. It was very helpful to have directions and parking information in advance!

¹ See Appendix 1 in the Reference and User Services Association's *Business Research Competencies* for common producers of business information:

<http://www.ala.org/rusa/sites/ala.org.rusa/files/content/resources/guidelines/business-research-competencies.pdf>

- Differing program aims or types of classes should be considered. For example, Lindsay's class was one of two information literacy classes for the course, while Kim's was a one-shot. Continuing the program will allow for more varied observation opportunities.
- If you have a peer instruction program in your home library, you may wish to contemplate the value of keeping both and trying to fit them in, or choose to participate in only one.

Conclusions and next steps

We both found the cross-institutional peer observation to be very beneficial. The opportunity to connect with a business librarian colleague and to learn different styles of teaching related to specialized resources and discipline specific content is valuable. In our case, we were able to reaffirm that our content and methods align with others' practice, as well as to gain ideas for improvement in certain areas of instruction.

We plan to continue sharing and observing our information literacy instruction practices. Having this in mind for the start of the new academic year will provide more options with the ability to look at course offerings over both fall and winter terms. Having started our cross-institutional peer observation in the winter 2020 term, we were lucky to have managed in-person observations before post-secondary institutions across North America closed their campuses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid switch to online learning has created a new challenge for librarians with the implementation of asynchronous and synchronous information literacy for online classes. In the immediate future, since we both may be called upon to deliver online instruction and reference over the summer sessions due to how COVID-19 is affecting our schools, we are exploring options for online peer observation, which will be a new mode of teaching for both of us.

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