

# {libfocus}

## Changing Roles, Not Missions: Why I Moved from Teaching to an Academic Library

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This guest blog post is written by Holly Meade-Kennedy from Maynooth University Library.



Maynooth Library: picture credit Alan Monaghan

In April 2024, I joined the Engagement and Information team as a Library Assistant in Maynooth University Library.

One theme that has continuously arisen in my reflections over the last year, is the close link between teaching and working within the Academic Library environment.

Following the passing of my beloved dad in 2021, the classroom - which had always been a safe haven for me as both student and teacher - suddenly became a place that represented a trojan workload I did not have capacity for in that chapter of my life. As I was also completing my third degree at the time as well as working full time, I began to rethink the path I was on. I have always loved learning and am a self-confessed nerd, so it was embarrassingly enjoyable for me up to that point to spend hours planning lessons and correcting (quite literally)

hundreds of essays in a single weekend. I pushed myself in every way I could to be the best student and teacher I could be simultaneously.

But one thing an earth-shattering event like grief does best is cause you to reassess your life choices up to that point. I knew I was working as hard as I could, but I hadn't stopped to check in with myself as to whether that work remained fulfilling to me. Being a teacher can often become an armour of identity we wear - and it's good to remind ourselves that we can take that off. We can hang it up and take it back out if it ever feels like a good fit in the future.

The element of teaching I cherished was the human connection. Selfishly, I loved the impact I could have on others by giving them my time and sharing lessons I had learned from others. Long days, difficult situations, endless red tape are all washed away when a student hands you a card at the end of a semester and thanks you for helping them see something differently, or learn something new.

I've always joked to other teacher friends that teaching is similar to childbirth - the payoff is so heart-warming it causes you to forget all of the tears and pain that were involved along the way and somehow you agree to do it again!

My dad used to take me on walks through the beautiful grounds of St. Patricks University Maynooth as a little girl, and as a sixth-year student in 2012 I put that same place top of my CAO form. I spent three years studying here and the library was a place I felt calm, safe and supported throughout my degree. The quiet of the second floor, the view of grounds, the inevitable Starbucks visits - my love of the MU library always stuck with me.

So as I took a walk through MU in late 2023 one afternoon on my way home from teaching a class on Feminism Studies in another college - a cause I had grown passionate about as I learned from the brilliant Dr. Sinead Kennedy of the MU English Department - it dawned on me that there was another way I could interact with students without the added pressure of being directly responsible for their education.

I began thinking about the possibility of working in MU Library. A few weeks after that day, a job was advertised for the role of Library Assistant and I took it as a sign from my dad that he

had taken that walk with me in spirit a few weeks before and had pointed me in this new direction in a place we both knew and loved.

Once I started in the role, it was clear to me there are so many similarities and overlaps between teaching and librarianship and I feel there are many teachers who may have come to the end or even a pause in their teaching journey - and I would love them to be motivated and reassured by this blog that there is life beyond teaching and library life might just be the right fit for them.

The skills many teachers possess - information literacy, research skills, source evaluation, adaptability and patience - all of these are transferable to roles within a library, particularly student-facing roles. The goals are also shared - a desire to help students succeed and supporting their academic journey.

However, the level of responsibility is the main difference and that can be the key thing that may attract teachers to the library. It was a positive change for me to be able to let go of formal teaching and lesson planning - but in truth it is an adjustment to adapt and let go of the authority. In the classroom you are the expert as the teacher, but in the library you're empowering students to seek out the expertise of others. At first this change can be strange, but the key is realising the change of authority comes with a release of responsibility and that can be a huge weight off your shoulders.

There are changes that require upskilling as you must learn about library systems and processes - but there are more overlaps than differences. Like teaching, every day is unpredictable and varied which keeps it interesting. You may spend ten minutes helping a student learn how to search for journal articles for an assignment and follow it up by creating some social media content highlighting the library's latest offerings.

The biggest change for me was the idea that once I left the Library at the end of the day, work was over. There was no correcting, responding or reviewing required. There was no learner records to uphold. No material to prepare. No lesson to plan. In my experience, I got to have the enriching interactions with students without the follow up work I had become so accustomed to. This change of pace was so welcome, and the quiet of the library makes for a peaceful and calm working environment.

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Having been on a grief journey, I am passionate about mental health awareness and I acknowledge the huge amount of pressure teachers are under with demands seemingly increasing all the time. It can be a hugely rewarding and positive career - but equally it can be demanding and draining. To me it felt teaching was a give in - if it is what you've trained in and if you're lucky enough to be good at something there's a tendency to box yourself in to being just that. But change is always possible and often even positive.

There were also many welcome surprises in my new role - who knew working in a Library wasn't just about shelving books? In fact, we have a team of shelveers who expertly take care of that. I focused on student interactions as part of the Information and Engagement team.

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One thing I loved about my new role that I know other teachers would appreciate too, is the ability to learn new skills. I've learned so much by getting involved in initiatives like the Athena Swan Library Self-Assessment Team and taking up different training. If you're willing to throw yourself in at the deep end, there is so much to learn at a comfortable pace.

Teachers understand that patience is key, and we are adept at pitching information at the right level. We can easily identify a student who may be struggling and point them in the direction of more help, and our experience with multi-tasking means we can manage busy work environments with confidence. I've felt my class-room management experience stand to me during a very small amount of more difficult interactions over the last year as I have been able to communicate calmly and effectively. All of these attributes make for not only an effective teacher, but an approachable and helpful Library Assistant too.

Like teaching - networking within the academic library community is important to build a community of like-minded peers and if you're lucky you will find helpful mentors too along the way. I can genuinely say I have been blown away at the support I've received from management in MU Library so far. I've felt embraced as a new member of the team and everyone has taken time to get to know me and help in any way they could.

Soon, I'll be starting a new position in the General Collections Department with a particular focus on E-Resources. This shows opportunity for career progression is possible and unlike

teaching, the path to progression can be quicker in some cases within the Academic Library environment as there are so many varied paths to expand into.

We choose a job at some point in our lives, but the trick is to keep asking yourself 'do I still choose this?' and remembering you always have a choice. So if the classroom no longer feels like the right place for you, maybe try the library!