
How I became a 'liaison' librarian

– a personal experience from University College Dublin



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INTRODUCTION

I started as a liaison librarian in University College Dublin (UCD) in October 2007. The initial euphoria and surprise of securing the job was followed with a degree of unease and bafflement. Okay, I have the job. They must think I can do it. But can I? And just what is the job anyway?

This article describes my first few days, weeks and months in the liaison librarian role, explores what the job is and what someone new to it can reasonably expect.

HOW I CAME TO LIBRARIANSHIP AND UCD

I came to UCD Library as a librarian just over a year after finishing library school, in UCD's School of Information & Library Studies. In my mid-twenties I had found myself at a bit of a loss to know what to do in terms of a 'career'. I had a job in a bank that I hated and there was a time when I could see no way out. But libraries had always held an appeal for me. I'd always loved books and reading. Whether it was Blyton as a kid, or Tolkien as a teenager, or Fitzgerald, Hemingway or Heller in university, the printed word and learning had always appealed to me. A library felt like a natural choice for a profession. On finishing library school, I worked as a library assistant in the public library of my hometown Kilkenny and then in the music library of Ireland's national broadcaster, Radio Telefís Éireann. People ask me now why I left RTÉ, it being the home of the Irish radio and television and, everyone assumes, infinite potential and romance. But its library was not a central part of the organisation. My perception was the non-library staff saw it as convenient but inessential, a bit like the Starbucks that was around the corner. UCD is across the road from RTÉ and had always held an attraction. I had

studied there for five years – doing an arts degree in English and history and then a masters in American literature, as well as the library course – and worked part time in its library for six months. I only ever had a professional development 'plan' in my head but, vague as the plan was, UCD Library was in it.

STARTING OUT

The job was advertised as 'Assistant Librarian, Business and Law', a short-term contract, for a little over six months. I didn't think I'd get the job and was surprised when I did. 'Assistant librarian' was the grade I was appointed at but the official role was to be 'liaison librarian'. 'Liaison' was mentioned in the advertisement and in the interview itself and I have interview notes where I list as my 'liaison' experience: 'I had to liaise with bank branch staff constantly in the bank. It's basically communication and I have excellent oral and written communication skills'. So, my job was 'basically communication'. Easy, right? In truth, I found out early and often that 'basically communication' was only part of it. There would be much more to it than that, thankfully.

THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND MY PLACE IN IT

University College Dublin is the biggest university in Ireland, with over 22,000 students. Its main library, the James Joyce Library – named after its most glittering alumnus – sits at the middle of the campus. UCD Library has over 100 staff, 33 of whom are librarians. Of these, 19 have a 'liaison' role of some sort, the vast majority having it as their full time role.

There are five colleges and 35 schools in UCD and the library now assigns a liaison librarian to each one. My responsibility is towards the College of Business and Law, my role being liaison librarian for the School of Law and the undergraduate Quinn School of Business. There is another liaison librarian for the postgraduate Smurfit School of Business, which is located on a separate campus. Business and Law are two of the larger schools in the university and have ten library staff specifically assigned to them. There is a good team ethic with everyone working well together. I like working with other people, it helps focus me and being able to talk to colleagues, to listen to alternative points of view and receive constructive feedback, is an important aspect of the liaison librarian role for me.

A 'LIAISON' LIBRARIAN

The term 'liaison librarian' is a relatively new one in UCD Library, having changed from 'subject librarian' in 2006. The new term captures the variety of the job in a way the old one ceased to. 'Liaison librarians' continue to be 'subject librarians' in that individual librarians are assigned different subjects and are responsible for providing expert support to the students and staff in these areas. The job description gives an idea of the job:

- liaising with schools;
- keeping schools informed of library developments;
- managing school library funds;
- collection development;
- providing information literacy teaching and training.

In fact, the job description captures only a part of it. The work I do on a daily basis is tremendously varied and it is this that is the most interesting factor. No two days are the same. Since I've started I've had information literacy sessions to prepare and deliver, rooms and lecture theatres to book and set up, budgets to manage, books to order, electronic journal subscriptions to renew, databases to trial. Every day I have scores of emails to read, phone calls to answer and return, books to order, queries to deal with or tours to provide. Other days I have information desk duty, meetings with library staff, academics or students. Some days I have a course or conference to go to, an open day, lecture or committee meeting to attend. There is all this and there is more besides as most days throw up something I haven't encountered before. It's important to be able to prioritise as sometimes five things can land on my desk at once. Multi-tasking has become an indispensable skill. The hours are long and it's next to impossible to get everything done that I would want to within my official office hours of nine to five. Idleness is not an option, even if I wanted it to be.

TRAINING

For a new librarian starting a new job – especially in their first librarianship post – training is crucial. There is so much to know that library school does not – and in many ways cannot – teach you. One thing I was lucky to have in those first few weeks and months was a manager with an open door policy. Any questions? Just knock.

Mentoring is a strategy common to the private sector and, while not official policy in UCD, it's an environment that encourages questions. So, I knocked on her door and asked questions and then asked more of them. And they were patiently answered, as they have to be. In my own case, I did not learn to become a librarian by securing a qualification from library school. I am learning it on the job and UCD has facilitated this.

There was, and is, support. UCD has a conference allowance for professional staff and I've used this to go to conferences and do courses in my subject areas. I'm currently doing an evening course in the Irish legal system. I am just back from a Manchester Business School course on finding business information on the Internet. During the summer, the library sent me on a trip to Manchester and Warwick to meet with the business librarians there, to get a feel for the subject and the job.

UCD Library runs an orientation module for new members of staff where they learn about the most important aspects of the university and the library. This took place about four months after I started and in the intervening time a lot of the training was on the job. I went around to the information literacy sessions that my colleagues were giving, seeing if I could learn from them. I also informally asked colleagues for advice over coffees and lunches. The 'communication skills' I had mentioned in my interview probably helped me here. You do need to be able to talk to people in this job. I took from the advice I got and from what I saw and based my early experiences on this. Once I grew into the job, I developed enough confidence to do my own thing. I saw what worked and what did not work. I've learned to stick to the point. A lot of the training for a new liaison librarian is self taught. You've got to pay attention, to watch how people are reacting, and keep doing this all the time.

Support can only bring anyone so far in any case. All the questions, courses and conferences in the world will not prepare you for that moment when you stand in the lecture theatre in front of 200 students. Then, you succeed or you fail on your own.

GETTING USED TO BEING A 'LIAISON' LIBRARIAN

When I started it was early in the academic year and a very busy time in the library. My position had been vacant for six months. I had to learn and learn fast. In my first few days, I was asked to give an information skills session the following week, my second week in the job, where I

would be demonstrating business databases and doing sample searches for business resources for students and a lecturer from the Quinn School of Business. I had no business background and limited experience of using databases or of speaking in front of groups of people. It was a bit surreal that first time but refusing to do it would have been counter-productive. The only way to get used to the job, to grow into it, is to do these things. You prepare as best you can and then do it. It's like riding a bicycle. It's hard the first time, scary even, but the second time, it's a little easier and you go on until soon it's not a problem. So it is with information literacy sessions. It is easy to have self-doubt but you have got to believe in yourself.

Since that first couple of weeks, my expertise has grown. Business and law are both fascinating subjects and you can learn so much by just paying attention – watching the news, listening to the radio, reading newspapers. The courses and conferences I attended helped too. Immersing myself in the job was key to getting to know what I was doing. In my first month or so, I compiled a report for the School of Law on their budget and how it was being spent and this helped me get to grips with the resources – what we had, how much they cost, which were the essential ones and so forth.

Collection development is a big part of a liaison librarian's job and when I started it took some time to know what materials to order and what not to. UCD Library has an information resources development policy and I consulted that but there was some material that I had to make a call on. Would this book be a worthwhile addition to the library? How many copies to order? Sometimes, instinct answers the question for you. One of my schools had lots of money in their book budget when I started but the other had hardly any and so I had to look at 'creative' ways of raising money. The school with little money was quite proactive and came up with substantial donations from their own postgraduates and alumni association. A reception was held in the library to mark one of these donations with wine and food on offer, which also helped with raising our profile in the school.

KEY ASPECTS OF THE JOB – INFORMATION LITERACY AND MARKETING

Talking to students about the library and its resources takes up a large part of any liaison librarian's working life in UCD. I knew the theory of information literacy when I started, having

done a module in information literacy instruction with Dr Claire McGuinness in library school in UCD. All new librarians are expected to give information skills sessions and since I started I've given lectures and workshops in front of groups ranging in size from two people to over two hundred. Topics covered in these sessions include the library's print and electronic resources, newspapers, evaluating information, plagiarism and referencing, literature reviews and the bibliographic software Endnote.

Some of these information literacy sessions are embedded in school modules, some are not. Most of the ones I have given to the Schools of Business and Law have been at the invitation of lecturers in the individual schools. We run an information literacy module for all first years in the Quinn School of Business, and there are embedded lectures in the law curriculum on accessing and using the library's legal resources and on plagiarism. UCD Library also has a teaching and learning group of which I am a member and we support embedded study skills and information literacy modules in various subjects. Most students in UCD are now encountering their librarians in some way, be it in the library or the lecture theatre.

The library should be difficult to ignore. It is usually a big building right in the middle of the campus, as it is in UCD. However, a common refrain that I hear is: 'I never use the library; everything I need is online'. Indeed ...and paid for and facilitated by the library! Using a library's electronic resources is using the library. Promotion, then, is key. Everything is worth trying. In UCD Library, we run 'roadshows', where we go to various places across campus and demonstrate library resources on laptops. They are moderately successful but what they do is raise the profile.

I have had many informal meetings with key academics and am invited to occasional staff meetings in the schools I support. I am now a member of the School of Law's teaching and learning committee. As liaison librarians we need to keep knocking on doors, 'cold calling', arranging meetings with academics, anything to become a familiar face and name. I have a number of academic contacts now but much work remains in terms of marketing and the best ideas about ways of gaining a foothold in schools still have to be formulated. The job is never done.

CONCLUSION

I was watching a DVD recently of the popular American television show *Heroes* and was struck by a scene where the teenage character Claire Bennett was looking to have a forbidden liaison with a boy from her class. Seeking to avoid the watchful gaze of her over-protective father, she told the dinner table she had to go to the library to work on a research paper. 'The library', her brother scoffed, 'haven't you ever heard of the Internet?' 'Actually', Claire answered, 'the research paper is on libraries and how during the digital age they're becoming increasingly obsolete for our generation'.

Now that I work in a library, I find myself very defensive of them and their worth. Sometimes I visit libraries when I'm abroad and places like the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. are awesome to walk around, venerable old buildings that just command respect and admiration. We cannot take it for granted though that everybody will feel the same way about libraries as librarians do. We know our value but we are probably in a minority. So it's up to all of us to ensure that we stay relevant, which is what we are striving to do in UCD. I've only worked here for a year and it's the first job I've had that I like. I'd like it to stay that way.