

“Leaving Academia Doesn’t Permanently Close Doors”



Ashleigh Johnstone



Abstract In our interview with Ashleigh Johnstone, she shares her journey from a PhD on martial arts and cognition through to an industry role, and then back to academia. Exploring options during the pandemic, Ashleigh worked in sales at an online research platform before returning to academia for university teaching. She values direct student interactions and university access initiatives. Ashleigh notes the openness needed adjusting to business discussions. Ashleigh encourages informational interviews and mental flexibility between sectors. She advises focusing on enjoyment not the “perfect” first job.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Ashleigh: Hello! I'm currently a lecturer in the School of Psychology at Arden University. Arden provides students with the opportunity to study through distance (or blended) learning and has the aim of opening higher education up to everyone. This is particularly important to me, as I wasn't well during my teenage years so I did my GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education exams) through online distance learning – without the opportunity to study in that way, I probably wouldn't be sitting here with a PhD teaching students. I get so much joy out of working with students from a range of backgrounds and seeing how we can best support them. Aside from teaching cognitive psychology modules, the other main part of my role is focused on employability initiatives, finding ways to encourage students to think about their employability and future career paths.

My main research area is looking at whether we can train cognitive functions, and I particularly enjoy the dissemination and public engagement side of research. I'm a huge believer that there's no point in doing cool research if we don't get to share it with other people!

What was the focus of your PhD?

I had 1 + 3 funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which meant I was given funding to cover my course fees for a 1-year masters and a 3-year PhD, as well as a stipend to cover living costs. This meant my masters and PhD were both on the same topic – cognitive changes associated with martial arts practice. I started my PhD in October 2016 and submitted it in September 2020, with my

viva taking place in November 2020. I studied at Bangor University under the supervision of Dr. Paloma Mari-Beffa.

I've always had an interest in cognitive training, perhaps influenced by my love of Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training game for the Nintendo DS as a kid! When I saw a PhD position being advertised to look at cognitive changes related to martial arts practice, I was really intrigued. Discussions with Paloma were focused on the idea that we know that physical activity and mindfulness have both been associated with improved cognition (attention in particular), and martial arts essentially combines exercise with meditation. We ended up being a great team – Paloma's a black belt in Karate and I've never done martial arts which helped us to get an interesting perspective on the topic!

Over the course of my PhD, I looked at attentional networks, task-switching, and response inhibition. Our main finding was that our martial arts participants showed higher levels of vigilance than our non-martial artists. So our martial artists were better able to respond to unexpected events! This actually makes a lot of sense. Imagine if you're sparring during training. You need to learn to respond quickly and accurately, even if you don't know when the hit is coming.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

The write-up phase of my PhD was far different than I'd ever expected. I was getting stuck into writing properly in early 2020 and then the pandemic hit. I had to quickly pack up my office with everything I may need to finish my PhD at home, with no idea when I'd be allowed back in. Writing a PhD in the middle of a pandemic was tough – there was a lot of stress and concern about what was going to happen with the wider world, and writing a thesis suddenly felt like it wasn't quite so important. I also had no idea what state the job market would be in by the time I submitted; would there even be a job anywhere for me to go to?

I always imagined submitting my thesis and going into a permanent teaching role – perhaps optimistic thinking! I'd had zero-hour contracts for teaching throughout my PhD but I'd been looking for something permanent. During the pandemic this suddenly felt like an impossible goal – there were hiring freezes and a complete lack of certainty about what the 'new normal' would be for universities and teaching. I felt like I was tiring of academia – although to be honest, now when I look back I think it was a general tiredness and anxiety about the state of the world – so I started widening my job search and looking at industry roles as well. At that point, my main criterion for a job was something that would allow me to work from home and would let me use my research knowledge.

What did you end up doing next?

When I first started looking at industry jobs, I didn't really know where to begin. During my time at university, there was a lot of focus on how to look for postdocs or teaching roles, but we never really spoke about alternative roles. Because it was never really spoken about, it felt a little bit like I was sneaking around in the background doing something 'naughty' by looking at jobs outside of academia.

I found myself going to general job sites and searching terms like 'research', 'data', 'psychology', 'behavioural science', and 'science communication' just to see what's out there. This ended up being a really helpful exercise; it allowed me to get a better idea of job titles and roles that would be relevant to my skill set. I also spent some time looking at companies that create tools used throughout the research process, as I thought it might be cool to work in a role that still had ties to academic research.

I took on a role at Gorilla, an online experiment builder. It was primarily a sales role, but I also got to talk with researchers most days to find out more about the cool research they were doing. My role evolved over time and it became more about building relationships with researchers across the world to find out how they were using online research and what we could do to help support them. I particularly enjoyed interviewing researchers who had published papers using Gorilla to find out more about their research and help them promote it across our social networks.

How did you come to return to academia?

I think that when I took an industry role, I had a naive 'grass is always greener' view that there would be no burnout in industry and that a solid work/life balance was a given. Whilst I was enjoying the majority of my work in the new role, I was starting to realise that there would always be pressures in any work environment. This was around the same time I was starting to miss teaching and working with students.

In early 2022 I was asked 'what puts a fire in your belly?' When I said it was 'teaching', I realised that I was in the wrong job. My passion has always been working with students to help them achieve their goals and it's really important to me that students feel supported and welcome in education. It's this that made me want to return to academia and teaching.

Making the decision was step one to returning; step two was getting past mental blocks. I remember feeling worried that academia wouldn't want me back, as if I had closed doors that wouldn't re-open for me. I also had a bit of fear that people would think I was a hypocrite. I'd made a big fuss of moving into industry and here I was a year and a half later thinking about going back to teaching. But I set those feelings aside and put in an application for Arden University, and here I am!

What advice do you have for someone deciding between academic and alternative roles for their next position?

I'd suggest reaching out to people who have moved into industry or alternative careers! An informational interview is a great way to find out about different careers, including what they involve day to day and their entry routes. Most people who have left academia are more than happy to share their experiences with academics thinking about making the move, so don't be afraid to reach out! I know that I've personally had informal chats with several people wanting to find out about industry roles.

My other piece of advice would be a reminder that leaving academia doesn't permanently close doors. I would love to see more fluidity between academia and industry, with more movement back and forth, and I think it's going to become increasingly common for movement in both directions. If you try an alternative career, then decide it's not for you, you'll have picked up great extra skills and knowledge to come back to academia with! Alternatively, you may decide that you love it and you're happy in your new career. Win win!

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life was like when you worked at Gorilla?

There was a lot of collaborative work even though it was remote working. Rarely did I have a day where I wasn't catching up with various members of the team about different projects. We also had daily team meetings which allowed us to stay up to date with what everyone else was working on. As for the work itself, it differed day to day but most days involved talking to researchers who use Gorilla either on calls or via email. I was always particularly interested in how universities were using online research methods to give students practical research experiences, particularly given the pandemic. Other days were more focused on creating content such as social media posts and email newsletters about the research being conducted on Gorilla.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed at Gorilla?

I think there are two strands to this. First, having the experience of working in a university setting was helping with some of the more boring and practical aspects of the job, like dealing with purchase orders and navigating procurement and finance hurdles. But I think the bigger thing was the idea that conducting my own research and doing my PhD has given me a strong sense of empathy for other researchers. I know what the pain points can be; I know what it's like to be an early career

researcher who just wants to get their research up and running as painlessly as possible. I think this made a big difference in how I felt able to build relationships with Gorilla users! I've been in their position and I think that's a level of authenticity and empathy that it'd be hard to get without my PhD experience.

It often felt nice when I could make direct connections between work I was doing at Gorilla and my PhD training. I know that it's common for people who leave academia to feel an element of guilt when they first leave. I felt like this for a while. I was worried that people would think I had 'wasted' my training by not following the academic path. I knew how competitive PhD places were and I was worried that people would think that I didn't deserve that opportunity if I was doing something different. Luckily my PhD supervisor set me straight on that very quickly! She told me that any good PhD supervisor will just want to know that their former student is happy and enjoys what they're doing.

How does that day-to-day life differ relative to your current position?

Well one thing that hasn't changed is my inbox; it still feels like I could spend all day catching up with emails! I think one of the main differences is that at Gorilla I had meetings every day to see how different projects were progressing. In my current role it feels like there's a bit more freedom and trust for me to just be able to crack on without daily check-ins.

What do you like most about work in your current role?

The actual teaching! As I've said, it's one of the main reasons I returned to academia and it's definitely been worth it. I've had some really enjoyable sessions lately talking with students about applied cognitive psychology and it's been so much fun to know they'll be leaving with a new appreciation for cognition work!

I'm also really enjoying being an academic again. I genuinely love being able to work directly with students, finding new collaborators to talk about pedagogy with, and working in a university setting. It just feels like the right place for me to be.

And what do you like least about work in your current role?

Honestly, at this point nothing comes to mind, I'm really enjoying doing what I'm doing and working with my team! I'm not sure whether this is because of my time out of academia and the fact that I thought carefully about where I'd make the return, but for now I'm just happy.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

My current role is very teaching focused and so I’d suggest thinking about whether teaching is something you are particularly passionate about. If you’ve decided that you really enjoy teaching, then a role like mine could be a good fit. If you’d prefer more of a teaching/research balance, then a teaching and research lectureship role may be better suited. I don’t think it’s always made clear to PhD students that there are different types of lectureship roles available in academia!

If someone were interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

Try to let go of any preconceptions you may have about academia and industry and make sure that you’re going in with an open mind. If you go into an industry role for the first time, you may find that there’s an adjustment process as you settle into a new way of doing things. Within academia there’s often the idea that we’re working towards ‘the greater good’ and it can feel a little jarring to go into a role where there are open discussions about the financial and commercial side of things, particularly if you’ve gone into something like a sales-focused role. Being able to go in with an open and curious mind can make a big difference to the adjustment time!

Do you think there are some aspects of being an academic that someone just finishing a PhD might not realize are part of the job?

I think there’s always going to be a lot of paperwork that appears seemingly out of nowhere! But there are also a lot of positive hidden aspects of the job that may not immediately be apparent. For example, one of my favourite parts of being an academic (other than the direct teaching) is about widening access and participation. As I’ve mentioned, I had setbacks during high school and so I had to fight to be able to stay in education, and so I find it really important that I am open about that and can show people in similar positions that there’s a place in education and academia for them. I find it really inspiring when I see academics sharing their background and experiences with the aim of reducing barriers and encouraging others. I don’t think I had ever considered that this may be part of the job as an academic until I found myself getting involved with widening participation initiatives.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

I think a lot of pressure can be put on people nearing the end of their PhD. It's such a big milestone and it can feel hard working towards that while also thinking 'what next?' My advice would be not to put too much pressure on yourself for your first post-PhD job to be 'the one'. It's okay to try different things and work out what you enjoy doing! You may find that some people will give you suggestions about what path they think you should take, but you should do what feels right for you.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

There are so many different roles available to people with a PhD – remember that you are highly skilled with a wide range of talents! There will be so many options open and available to you once you've got the confidence in your skills and know how to sell them in a job application. Feel free to connect with people in similar roles on LinkedIn or follow them on Twitter (or Mastodon, or Bluesky!) to learn more about them, and don't be afraid to reach out to them for a chat or informational interview!

Thank you for your advice and insights, Ashleigh!