

Aspiring academics: a resource book for graduate students and early career faculty, edited by Michael Solem, Kenneth Foote and Janice Monk, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson Education, 2009, 212 pp., US\$29.33 (paperback), ISBN 0-13-604891-9

There is a growing market in books aimed at new academics. Most provide generic advice. This edited book is different in that it adopts a disciplinary approach to the topic and responds to the call for integrating discipline-based examples into courses and workshops for new academics (Healey & Jenkins, 2003). The editors, and nearly all the authors, are practising geographers. Hence, most of the examples come from this discipline. However, the chapters all start from general principles and most of the ideas are applicable to academics from any subject and not just the social and environmental disciplines.

As reviewers we are, respectively, an aspiring academic in the middle of the final year of her PhD and an experienced academic who runs teaching and learning workshops in many different countries. We are also both geographers. Hence, we think that we may be able to provide some complementary perspectives on the usefulness of this book.

Most books aimed at new academics focus on teaching and learning. This book differs in that it is concerned with balance in academic life, and the editors see “teaching, research, service, outreach, and our personal lives as interconnected” (p. 66). The book is divided into three inter-related sections: “Career planning and personal management”; “Developing and enhancing teaching and advising skills”; and “Research opportunities and responsibilities”. This approach, of course, limits the number and depth of coverage in each of the sections. The editors have partially overcome this issue by publishing a separate volume on Teaching college geography (Solem & Foote, 2009).

The book developed from the experience of the editors running the Geography Faculty Development Alliance. Since 2002, this group has run week-long workshops for new faculty working in the USA. One of the reviewers contributed to two of the early workshops. Unlike in Australasia and the UK, where courses in teaching and learning or academic practice are often compulsory for new staff, such courses are rare in the USA.

Each section contains four to five chapters examining topics that the editors feel to be the key concerns of the target audience. The chapters provide a context to each subject area, grounding the reader within the literature and facilitating a starting point for understanding the importance of each topic. This is usually followed by some suggestions about practical steps to address some of the suggestions not only on strategies for academics to survive their early years in the academy, but also guidance on planning their future professional lives. All but 3 of the 21 contributors are from the USA and most of the chapters are written for a North American audience. Nevertheless, many of the ideas and suggestions are transferable to other national contexts.

By providing complementary support activities and a discussion forum on the internet (though not available at the time of the review), the book follows one of its key messages: that learning should be active. However, we wonder how many busy academics are going to look somewhere else for these activities. They may be more helpful for academic developers looking for exercises to use in their workshops. Many of the chapters provide suggestions not only on strategies for academics to survive their early years in the academy, but also guidance on planning their future professional lives. This is a particular focus of the first section, with chapters on “Time management”, “Career planning”, and “Balancing personal and professional lives”.

The second section of the book focuses on teaching and is particularly useful for providing applied tips and ideas which individuals can easily adopt and use in their practice. This is achieved especially

in Chapter 6, “Designing significant learning experiences” by Fink and Ganus. Overall, this section of the book provides theoretical insights and practical advice to individuals who may not have come across these ideas before and may encourage them to take a greater interest in their teaching practices in the future. However, there was one area where the good practice idea seemed inappropriate to us. Shelly and Proffer, in discussing the role of advising students, suggest that:

If in your interaction with a student you see clear evidence of depression, domestic violence, or drug abuse, be proactive. Call a medical professional or a counselling centre to set up an appointment for the student. If possible, accompany the student to make sure that he or she keeps the appointment. (p. 108)

Many staff may not be comfortable with being as proactive as this. In Chapter 9, Ketchum illustrates an example where ethical issues may arise if a staff member attempts to show that he’s like his students by discussing his personal life in-depth in teaching slots. This attempt to be “friends” with students can be an issue in itself. Yet both in- and outside of the academy, to arrange an appointment for someone, followed by checking up on them to make sure that they keep an appointment, is ethically questionable.

As already noted, the book separates discussion of teaching and research issues, with the third section focusing on research. Though an understandable way of structuring the material, it serves to reinforce the differences rather than the potential synergies between the two activities. There is a missed opportunity in not discussing ways of linking research and teaching to benefit student learning. The benefits of a more integrated approach are well illustrated in the final chapter, “Working across disciplinary boundaries”, which discusses interdisciplinary work in teaching and research. We think it is a pity that this integrated approach was not also followed in some other chapters, for example, merging the two chapters on ethics and discussing the concept of “an ethical geographer” (Boyd et al., 2008).

The target audience of each chapter, whether early postgraduates or early staff members, varies. In some cases the authors fall between the two stools, providing what could be seen as unnecessary advice for academics already in employment, or addressing issues too far in the future for early postgraduates. For example, Chapter 3, “Developing collegial relationships in a department and a discipline”, at times states common-sense principles in a way that implies postgraduates have been isolated from social interaction within a department throughout the course of their doctorate work. Although information on how to adjust to collegial dynamics may be useful to postgraduate students at the very beginnings of their academic career, at points this chapter verges on patronising individuals who have had some experience of the academy already.

In Chapter 13 on “Academic publishing”, Brunn spends a substantial amount of space explaining the value of publishing for the individual and the academy, an understanding that individuals relatively early on in their graduate career should have already grasped. However, in the first example of direct advice the author skips to a different audience, suggesting that individuals who already have tenure-track positions should sketch out a publishing plan. The range of advice is useful at different points in an individual’s career. However, the frequent switching in addressing its two main audiences creates a slightly stunted feeling and several chapters fail to provide an effective bridge between the needs of first-year postgraduates and those of early career academics. A clear message at the beginning of each chapter stating the target audience would make it easier for individuals to dip into the book at appropriate places at different stages in their career.

Overall, this is a succinct, easy to read, informative book for postgraduates and early career academics. More than anything else, this book should open the eyes of postgraduates to the full range of responsibilities expected of academics. Whether this will inspire or dishearten them will no doubt vary, but it will certainly provide the target audience with a greater understanding of the variety of different areas that they will experience and need to address within their early academic careers. Academic developers will find this book a useful source of both general and subject-specific advice which they can integrate into their courses and workshops.

References

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