Review

_Professional development in Applied Linguistics: A guide to success for graduate students and early career faculty_

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Often symbolic of complexity or even mystery, professional development in academia has been depicted as a myth especially for the graduates. Each year, tens of thousands of students will earn their PhD after years of investment, both intellectual and financial, whilst their ends may not justify the means since only a small proportion of them will find a job or career they are satisfied or at least happy with (Kelsky, 2015: 2). And such a phenomenon is not rare in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL), which implicitly reflects the lack of professional development training for graduates and early career researchers (ECRs) in this field. One factor contributing to this phenomenon, according to the editor Luke Plonsky, is what he describes as ‘injustice’, as some graduate schools do provide formal or official professional training for postgraduates, such as workshops, or even stipulated such training as a compulsory module, while others may offer it in an informal, ad hoc manner. Having realised such a gap and injustice, this ground-breaking book, _Professional development in Applied Linguistics_, aims to demystify and offer guidance regarding the professional development to graduates and ECRs in AL. The reason why the word ‘ground-breaking’ is chosen for describing this book is because of its systematicity and large variety. Granted there are publications about helping PhD students in navigating the job market (e.g., Kelsky, 2015), few of them have
illustrated the path or process of advancing in academia systematically, and few of them have encapsulated different authors for different chapters like this book by Plonsky.

This book consists of thirteen chapters and one detailed index. The content table of this book, from the perspective of the reviewer, could be perceived as a road map or even a lifelong story line of a graduate or ECR. If we look at the content, it begins with applying for a PhD programme to different stages during one’s PhD and job hunting after it, to eventually the tenure position, which is literally an ‘ultimate’ destination for ECRs. Despite this book explicitly targeting two stakeholders, namely, graduates and ECRs, the boundary for these two stakeholders is actually blurring as all thirteen chapters could be directly useful for all of them. Still, this book could be divided as two parts from the view of the reviewer: first half chapter 1 to 7 and second half chapter 8 to 13. The first half is more relevant to graduates the context of these chapters are generally situated in the university or school setting, such as the graduate school (chapter 3) and writing of the dissertation (chapter 6), whilst the second half could be of more assistance to ECRs as these chapters cover the typical work or duties in academia such as journal reviewing (chapter 9) and supervising PhD candidates (chapter 11). Unlike other research papers or articles the editor used to write, the overarching register of this book is less academic and easy to follow as Plonsky acknowledges that this book aims to provide services for the community of AL. Therefore, this book is easily accessible and comprehensible not only for the AL graduates and ECRs but also for a wider range of readers. Plonsky suggested that this book could be read for relaxation in a relaxing environment (p.6) as the overall topic of this book is neither intricate nor academic but more relevant to our daily lives.

The first chapter by Plonsky serves as the introduction to this whole book. As he puts at the beginning this chapter, the idea or impetus for writing this book came from his physical therapy, when he realised the students or academics need ‘a base of knowledge and skills that goes beyond the theoretical, methodological, and/or practical knowledge of the field’ (p.1). This chapter then chronicles the brief overview of each chapter in this book and aims to let readers pinpoint certain chapters that would interest them. This chapter ends with suggestions on how to read this book in a relaxing manner and an optimistic outlook in terms of the professions of the community of AL.

Chapter 2, ‘Demystifying the process: Choosing, applying to, and getting accepted to a doctoral program in Applied linguistics’, is written by Ayşenür Sağdıç and Dan Isbell, who went through the process of applying to PhD programs just a few years ago. In this sense, the views and perspective in this
chapter are rather fresh. This chapter narrates the steps from choosing a programme to application process and eventually accepting the offer, accompanied by practical *dos and don’ts* tables in each step. Although this is very first step of one’s career, it is nonetheless the most paramount one as it shapes or makes what we will become in the long run in AL (Thomson, 2013).

Once one has been accepted by a PhD programme, one critical question that comes up next is how to make the most of the graduate school, and this is the topic of Chapter 3 ‘Navigating graduate school and academia’. Alison Mackey, the author, has drawn immensely from her two-decade of work experience in graduate schools and illustrates the potential problems a PhD candidate might encounter during each step. Furthermore, this chapter suggests how to make the most of the graduate school and boost one’s own profile by working, as the chapter mentions, as a Research Assistant (RA) and/or Teaching Assistant (TA) for instance.

Chapter 4 deals with one of the most significant and meaningful matters for graduates and ECRs (AL conferences). Peter De Costa, the author of this chapter who has been regarded as ‘the best conference-r’ (p. 4) by the editor, listed things to do and to consider before, during, and after the conference. This chapter not only depicts this from the academic or professional angle, i.e., submitting the proposal and making the presentation, but also considers wider aspects such as networking and social etiquette, which, from De Costa’s perspective, is much more vital. Networking is especially vital for recent graduates at conferences not only provide the opportunity to present their work but also connect with other scholars, whether emerging ones or established ones. Each attendee can take advantage of this networking (p. 47), and De Costa cannot emphasise the importance of manners and behaviour too much. At the end of the chapter, De Costa does not forget to remind us that even a formal academic conference can be approached as a means of relaxation and having some fun (p. 48).

Chapter 5 by Tove Larsson and colleagues is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the essence of this whole book as it implicitly conveys the ultimate objective of this book, and it is interesting to read. Life is not all about work and study, even for an academic, and one should not be so fully engaged in his or her work as to neglect his or her life (p. 49). Therefore, the importance of achieving a balance cannot be emphasised too much. Six established scholars in AL share their own story and opinion as well as suggestions for this balance. Their story comes from different perspectives, such as that of a parent (Rhonda Oliver) or that of having a social life (Tove Larsson), which allows this chapter to have a wider range of readers to resonate with. Nonetheless, as Plonsky says, these six essays stem from the authors’ own experience, which may be seen as subjective, and none
could confirm that they did an excellent job of maintaining a good work/study-life balance (p. 49). Still, there is still some treasures that graduates and ECRs could mine from this chapter.

In chapter 6, John Bitchener walks us through the stages of dissertation writing, from writing research proposals during pre-enrolment to conducting research and writing, to eventually submission and viva or defence. What is outstanding in this chapter is that the sequence of key stages the author lists (e.g., pp. 67, 69) not only makes this chapter logical and connected but also firmly grasps the readers’ attention. The chapter ends with typical viva questions, and this, in this reviewer’s opinion, is highly useful, especially for final year PhD candidates.

Inevitably, we cannot be PhD candidates forever, and eventually (or sadly) we have to enter and compete in the job market, yet the academic job market ‘is often shrouded in mystery’ (p. 79). Chapter 7 aims to unmask this mystery and guide graduates to find employment in academia step by step, including practice skills for doing research and CV/cover letter writing. Another objective of this chapter is to offer updated resources in jobs/employment for AL graduates.

Chapter 8 to 11 shift the focus from study towards the professional life in academia. Chapter 8 deals with one of the most complicated yet unavoidable issue in academic work: interpersonal relationships. Working in academia can be completely different from being a PhD candidate because there is always potential hostility from one’s colleagues, superiors or even students, and injustice may occur as well, such as gender discrimination (Guarino and Borden, 2017). The author of this chapter, Bryan Smith, offers his views on how to deal with various people while keeping your own work on track, basing this on his own experience.

Unlike chapter 8, chapter 9 to 11 discusses comparatively more practical work of an AL profession, though these tasks or duties are still accompanied by unavoidable interpersonal relationships. In chapter 9, Rebecca Sachs talks about one integral task as an academic profession: ‘Reviewing manuscripts for academic journals’. Sachs first explains what reviewing is and how it works (p. 113), then follows with the benefits of being a reviewer, and, last but not the least, things to be cautious about when reviewing others’ work, which is highly useful, especially for the ECRs. Another thing that early career professions would usually do is to engage with professional organisations, which is what chapter 10 is about. In a narrative register, Heidi Byrnes discusses the benefits of engaging with professional organisations based on her own experience in participating with different AL organisations. Engaging with professional organisations, as she suggested, is a personal and career enrichment (p. 139). Chapter 11
discusses supervising doctoral students, which is a rather later stage for ECRs, and it is a compulsory and common duty for the teaching faculty in higher education settings (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1998). Having supervised over 30 PhD students since 2002, the author, Jean-Marc Dewaele, provides a blueprint on how to maintain an ecological relationship between supervisor and supervisee in different stages, including the post-PhD relationship. This chapter not only offers suggestions for supervisors but also contains some useful tips for doctoral students.

Working in academia, writing academic papers for peers will not be much of a challenge, yet writing for a general audience consisting of non-experts could be a different story, and this is what chapter 12, ‘Crossover’, is about. Deborah Tannen talks about the difficulties in writing for public audiences and the differences between academic writing and writing for general readers from her perspective.

The last chapter talks about what would normally be considered the end of being an ECR or junior scholar: tenure. Written in a humorous tone, the authors, Kimberly Geeslin and Laura Gurzynski-Weiss, illustrate things to do and to be cautious about when working towards tenure from the beginning of one ECR’s career. This chapter ends with a discussion of what it takes to be a successful scholar in the field of AL and, from the perspective of this reviewer, is a perfect summary of this whole book.

To sum up, this book provides an explicit and vivid storyline of a graduate and ECR in AL based on the experience of senior scholars in an easy-to-follow register, and all the chapters are of high quality as the content are all quite succinct yet helpful. Despite that, there are two things (or, we could say, limitations) that could be improved. First, it would be much helpful to include authors from a broader geographical range, such as Asian countries. There are numerous AL graduates or ECRs whose first language is not English, and the perceptions of senior scholars in those contexts could be more conducive to them (Iyer, Kettle, Luke and Mills, 2014). After all, Applied Linguistics does not belong solely to English-native speaking contexts. Second, it would be more helpful if this book could trace the narrative from an earlier stage, such as adding a chapter aimed at those who are doing Master’s degree or even undergraduate studies. As early as it may seem, there is still a lot one could do in these incipient stages. Some students may develop an interest in and decide to advance in the field of academia when they are working on a Master’s degree. Pursuing a career in academia is a lifelong process (Koen and Bester, 2009). Therefore, adding a chapter regarding this topic could make this book more holistic and even complete; it could include suggestions and ways to prepare for a PhD.
In spite of the limitations, this book is, as I said at the beginning, ground-breaking in AL. It focuses on a non-academic yet essential issue in AL, and it serves as a pioneer in providing professional development guidance or a service to AL graduates and ECRs. Hopefully, this book will raise the attention for graduates’ professional development of the worldwide educational settings in AL. Furthermore, although this book is targeted at graduates and ECRs in the field of AL, it could also be useful for graduates and ECRs in other connected fields such as STEM or medicine. On the contrary, even though research is being done in different fields, the phases or processes among graduates and ECRs are literally quite identical. Therefore, this book is not only a milestone for AL but also for wider academia as this book could support all graduates and ECRs who are following the professional path in academia.

References


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