Introduction

As I sit and put pen to paper for this Viewpoint, I have just returned from my first training run of 2010 for the London Marathon in April. This is the first marathon I’ve entered (a midlife ‘challenge’) and the training schedule seems daunting; yet I know if I achieve my target, I will have benefitted others through fundraising, and also achieved something for myself. In this excellent AMEE Guide (McGaghie, 2009), the author reminds us that scholarship and publication in health education is more akin to a marathon than a sprint: it is hard work, requires long-term, planned and deliberate practice, but if one knows what is required, and can set aside the appropriate time and resources, the chances of success can be maximised. Ultimately there will be benefits for others (“educating superb clinicians” is the bottom line), and also for oneself in terms of career development and job satisfaction. This Guide is McGaghie’s practical training manual for the marathon that is scholarship, publication and academic career development in health professions education.

There is no doubt that this is a key topic for all involved in medical and health education, since it really concerns the essence of what is to be an academic, and the guide summarises much of the recent literature on the topic of scholarship for academic health professionals. Basing the Guide on five workshops at AMEE conferences from 2004 to 2008, the author also reflects on 35 years of his own academic career and offers many valuable personal insights. At 17 pages, the Guide might seem at least a ‘middle distance’ read, but it is well-worth the effort, both for newcomers and more experienced academics.

Highlights

Scholarship

We are initially reminded of the broad nature of ‘scholarship’ and its assessment (especially the Glassick criteria (Glassick et al., 1997)), but importantly McGaghie then covers the attributes of scholarly individuals and their motivations, before moving on to discuss productive teams, an issue which I feel merits some reflection.

The first part of my career as a doctor was as a Medical Officer in the Royal Navy, and after a long stretches at a sea, the phrase “R&R” was something to raise the spirits. Sadly for the academic, “R&R” (‘revise and resubmit’) is less gladdening to the heart, and perhaps much more commonly encountered, than the military’s ‘rest and recuperation’! Publication is competitive and the Guide reminds us that only 5% of submitted manuscripts are accepted immediately for journal publication, with a further 15% being accepted after ‘R&R’. 80% are
rejected immediately and thus rejection will be a fact of academic life experienced by all scholars. Knowing when to collaborate seems to be key, and the section on productive academic teams, including what Kunstler calls the “hothouse effect” (Kunstler, 2004) is of interest. Hothouses make things grow quickly, and the ‘methodology’ has been used to change cultures in organisations over a short time period (it is even being use in my local Primary Care Trust in the UK at present). The principle is to isolate a team of ‘champions’ in the hothouse and let them own and run with many small activities under the umbrella of the ‘hothouse’. The lesson for academic teams is to seek and nurture the enthusiasts and encourage them to own several small scholarly projects, many of which may be linked, but, which will set the culture of commitment and achievement for the team. In leadership terms this is how a good leader of the team might create what Kotter would call ‘a sense of urgency’ (Kotter, 2008).

If, as McGaghie claims, there are rules to the game of publication, the concept of ‘game theory’, which essentially examines when to collaborate or to compete, an example being ‘The Prisoner’s Dilemma’ (Poundstone, 1993), might be worthy of mention. The related concepts of ‘co-opetition’ (Nalebuff and Brandenburger, 1996) or what has been called the ‘complexity of cooperation’ (Axelrod, 1997) should also interest the productive scholarly team. The bottom line is that in the longer term collaboration with team members, and indeed with other teams, usually pays off, though significant short term gains can be made by competitive and more selfish behaviour. I guess it depends on whether you envisage a long term project with your scholarly team and other academic partners (when collaboration and trust win out), or whether you are out for maximum personal gain in a short period of time (when you should compete and play foul). I suspect most academics will have come across someone in the latter category!

The Road to Publication

In this middle section, the guide offers important insights into what editors and peer reviewers are looking for, importantly highlighting the “who cares?” test. Several simple rules are then offered regarding planning and preparation and the discipline of writing. Particularly memorable are the ‘Fenstemacher Laws of Writing’, derived from the author’s ninth grade English teacher, Mrs. Beryl Fenstemacher. For medical academics these three laws may perhaps be as important as the laws of thermodynamics for physicists. Her first law is captured in five words: “plan, organise, outline, outline, outline ...”, excellent advice for drafting a manuscript. Her second law instructs authors to present reports to readers that a) tell them what you set out to do, b) tell them what you did, c) tell them what you found, d) discuss what you found and e) do not forget about style. Her final piece of wisdom is that you ‘never get a second chance to make a first impression!’; again sound advice when submitting a manuscript.

One important section included is that of ‘Writing in English’, highlighting in particular the problems experienced by those who contribute in ‘English as an International Language’ (EIL). In my own institution we continually struggle with this issue with many of our international postgraduate students at Masters level and above, and often come across differing interpretations of the cardinal sin of ‘plagiarism’, as well as grammatical and syntactical issues. The solution perhaps is to tailor academic skills training to the individual taking account of their cultural background (easier said than done) and to ensure that IELT or equivalent scores are as high as possible before accepting students or allowing them to submit scholarly work for academic publication. For those submitting from abroad, proof reading for grammar and style is essential before submission and the acquisition of a ‘critical English language friend’ is highly recommended.
Career Advancement

All 21 tips suggested in the Guide are worth remembering, and cover areas such as managing one's portfolio (it's never too late to start), planning and organising, setting goals, reading more widely than academic literature, getting ethics approval, and, importantly, always aiming to 'have something in press'. The importance of personal relationships in maintaining a happy and productive life was recently highlighted in a review of the 'Grant Study' of 268 Harvard graduates from the early 1940s, overseen by Dr. George Vaillant (Shenk, 2009). Vaillant’s conclusion after 70 years of following this group was that: ‘the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people’. Hence the Guide’s advice to engage mentors, practice ‘team science’, associate with challenging colleagues from different fields (while staying away from exploiters and parasites), to address conflict and tension and lastly to enjoy one’s work and colleagues, does indeed seem particularly apposite. Despite its sometimes solitary nature, much scholarly activity must involve nurturing and culturing relationships.

Perhaps one additional, yet very basic, tip might be: ‘Write it down’. So many potential authors have great ideas triggered in conversations with others, often at academic conferences over dinner or a drink. Keeping a notebook or dictaphone in one's pocket can be very useful in such circumstances, since capturing the idea or train of thought is all important to getting started on a publication or research project. Better to be prepared rather than have to rely on the beer mat, like Watson & Crick.

Conclusion

This is an important AMEE Guide for all academic health professionals. The author stresses the importance of long-term planning and does not examine in detail the place of luck or serendipity in an academic and publishing career, since, as he says, one's career is too important to leave to chance. So perhaps academics should learn from the golfer Gary Player who is purported to have replied to a spectator who commented “Gee - that was lucky”, as Player holed a bunker shot from next to the green: “You know the more I practice, the luckier I get”.

Throughout the guide, the author offers us many pearls of wisdom, often in terms of heuristics or simple rules. Complexity theory teaches us that complex structures of natural beauty and elegance can emerge from systems which operate through very simple rules. It may well be that following the heuristics suggested in this monograph will enable healthcare academics to develop manuscripts and academic careers of similar elegance and beauty.

References


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The AMEE Guide to which this supplement refers was published as McGaghie WC. 2009. Scholarship, publication and career advancement in health professions education: AMEE Guide no. 43. Med Teach 31:574–590.

This AMEE Guide Supplement was published in Medical Teacher 2010. 32:530–532.