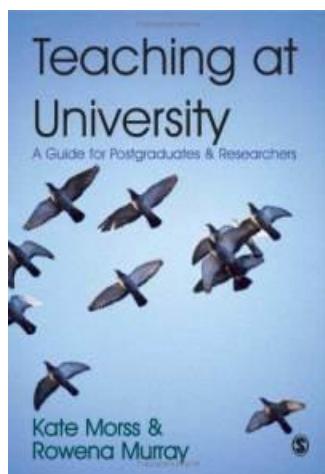


Book Review



Teaching at University: A Guide for Postgraduates and Researchers

by Kate Morss and Rowena Murray
London: Sage Publications (2005).

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Review by **Mark Walsh**

The prospect of beginning a teaching career is daunting under any circumstances. This is especially true for the postgraduate or researcher contemplating their first steps in teaching at university, as these steps must be taken alongside considerable existing commitments to research.

In this clear and readable guide, authors Kate Morss and Rowena Murray have set out to equip their readers with a set of approaches, generic skills and specific techniques that can be directly and immediately applied to teaching in a variety of settings in higher education. While this practical approach is an effective selling point for the new teachers who comprise their target audience, the authors are clear that their book should be considered as much more than a mere survival guide. They are clear that from the very outset, new teachers should make a commitment to self-analysis and professional development. Their approach is structured to facilitate this process and they take care to frame their advice with outlines of relevant pedagogic theory, supported by reference to an extensive literature. While they are candid about controversies and debates within this literature, they avoid dense descriptions of theory in favour of brevity and clarity. In this way the authors are able to strike a difficult balance: there is sufficient reference to the literature to enable interested parties to delve more deeply into any of the subjects covered, but the discussion of theory is always almost immediately related to practical steps that can be taken to guide and improve teaching and learning in the lecture theatre, seminar room or laboratory.

The authors summarise the benefits of this approach in chapter 1, 'Theory and Practice'. This chapter highlights how an appreciation of theory can help the new teacher acquire credibility, while simultaneously developing an understanding of learning styles and approaches that can be directly applied to the planning of teaching assignments. The book then moves on to a series of guides to 'Your First Lectures', 'Tutorials', 'Electronic Discussions' and 'Laboratory or Fieldwork Practicals' (chapters 2-5). In these chapters, questions and concerns typically raised by postgraduate teachers are listed, a section of the relevant literature is overviewed and a step-by-step guide to planning and structuring the activity at hand is provided. Advice is then given on how to overcome anxieties and specific problems that may arise during the classes. The chapters end with suggestions on how best to learn from the teaching experience, both in the short-term sense of improving as a teacher from class to class and also with the longer term goals of developing professional competence and employability in mind.

The book continues with two excellent chapters on the associated issues of 'Assessment and Feedback to Students' and 'Student Relations' (chapters 6 and 7). These chapters neatly

identify potential pitfalls and provide strategies for coping with all manner of situations, ranging from aggressive behaviour in tutorials (on the part of the students!) to the practicalities of writing clear and useful comments on a hundred undergraduate essays with a strict deadline looming. The authors then discuss 'Supervising Undergraduate Projects and Dissertations' (chapter 8) and the politics of 'Programme Validation and Module Management' (chapter 9), in which they examine internal and external processes of quality control. They conclude by stressing the vital importance of getting 'Feedback on Your Teaching and Continuing Professional Development' (chapter 10). Feedback from students and colleagues, alongside self-reflection and self-evaluation are highlighted as the essential mechanisms through which an academic can continue to develop as a teacher throughout his or her career.

These chapter headings give an indication of the comprehensiveness of the book. The authors have addressed every aspect of the teaching experience at UK universities, and much of the material will likely be equally relevant to institutions in other countries. As the book is short (201 pages, excluding references, and complemented by numerous tables, charts and asides in text boxes), this comprehensiveness inevitably leads to the only serious weakness: not every topic can be covered in the depth that the reader might wish. For instance, on page 68, a rather frightening array of difficulties that could arise when taking a tutorial is listed, and the authors are less than reassuring when they go on to say that, "it is not our intention to provide solutions to all of these problems". However, they do provide helpful general coping strategies, and are ready with a reference to a more comprehensive source. This is typical of the book's general approach: the authors point out the way ahead, offering suggestions and encouragement, but they are clear that the individual's own wider reading, observations and reflection are key to making real progress.

This book is therefore of most use to the target audience identified by the authors: postgraduates and researchers new to teaching. For them, it provides an invaluable introduction to current (up to 2005) theory and can be expected to function very effectively as the book of first resort when planning new teaching assignments. The book is almost equally useful to those with some experience of teaching, but who are new to the university environment. For these readers, the discussions of the particular needs and outlooks of undergraduate learners and the practicalities of programme development and validation in the higher education sector will be of great use and interest.

Morss and Murray have provided new university level teachers with a book that takes their concerns and anxieties seriously, provides them with an overview of theory relevant to their day-to-day work, and links this to practical techniques that make the planning and delivery of university teaching seem considerably more manageable. Throughout, they stress the importance of delivering not just good 'teaching', but good 'learning'. It is their concern for the development of both inexperienced teachers and their current and future students that makes their book so valuable and the clarity with which this concern is expressed ensures that the book will be an essential part of any new teacher's reading for quite some time to come.