How to be an Academic Superhero: Establishing and Sustaining a Successful Career in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities
Iain Hay
Edward Elgar, 2017

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Who could argue with the aspiration and intent of ‘Establishing and Sustaining a Successful Career’ as an academic, which is the sub-title of this 2017 book, penned by Iain Hay, professor at an Australian University? And its goal is laudable, ‘to go some way to minimize anxieties felt by early-career, as well as more senior scholars’. I applaud the content around ‘keeping refreshed and staying happy and healthy’. But the superhero emphasis I find disturbing in that ‘challenges in this book need to be addressed continuously and sometimes simultaneously across a career’ (p. 7). This has the whiff of perpetual motion and pressure to perform.
I must also declare an interest – or rather declare my MPhil. On page 13, Hay asserts that ‘an academic superhero in the humanities…will almost certainly need a research doctorate (e.g. PhD, DPhil).’ I don’t doubt this in 21st century academe, but what a sad indictment of our profession, in which I would have rather hoped the importance of a teaching qualification might have been raised and elevated; or the role and value of professionals who also turn their hand to higher education inputs. But no. Furthermore, the author goes on: ‘unjustified as it may seem, a degree from Oxford or Harvard will almost assuredly be regarded better than one from a newer, smaller, or provincial university and position you better in the academic job market’. Wherefore TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework), wherefore a moral duty to serve those paying around £9,000 per year for the privilege of our teaching?

And we’re almost into a eugenics programme with the - entirely correct I’m sure – observation that the average age at which a North American postgraduate gains a PhD is 33... which coincides with the time period in which many choose to have a baby! The subtext seems to be, have a child young and forget academic promotion. ‘Find a good adviser’ is the Chapter 3 title which begins part-way through the individual’s career ... as a postgraduate researcher; what about finding a good adviser, mentor and dissertation supervisor, as an undergraduate!? Furthermore, selecting a good doctoral research adviser doesn’t explicitly highlight the importance of locating someone who is, apart from the technical capabilities listed, kind, constructive and humane.

Then there is the whole business of superheroes – individuals who are supernatural or super-human; like Thor, Loki or Iron Man. Academics meanwhile are all too human – like the rest of humanity! Superhumanity is perhaps asking too much, seeking a narrow and stressful path towards an early grave. ‘Get mentors: get advice’ is the exhortation in Chapter 4. Absolutely right. But again, the humanity is missing ... for the mentee building ‘professional and collaborative networks’ (Box 4.1) will undoubtedly be valuable and important; but what about building (professionally-supportive) friendships?
What I do appreciate from Iain Hay is his willingness to share his own experiences and failings, such as (p.36) labouring ‘without clear direction, following my heart and seizing, more or less ad hoc, attractive academic opportunities as they presented themselves.’ And I wholeheartedly agree with the rallying cry to connect to ‘good colleagues; be a good colleague’ (p. 44). Hay’s book is a methodical and very practical DIY manual for academics in 2018, for example covering ‘How to say ‘no’: tactful ways of declining requests...’ (Table 17.3). Similarly, ‘Sustain collegiality’ is an important message – to ‘the best of your abilities, try to help out ... The web of obligations is two-sided and you will receive reciprocal favors over time’ (citing Gray and Drew, 2012: 117). Good advice too about staying happy and healthy (Ch.34); emphasising the importance of saying ‘thank you’; forgiving others their foibles; being optimistic and mindful – staying in the present, and not getting dragged into jealousies and grudges that can damage the individual and those around them.

Chapter 18 ‘Publish papers’ does have an equivalent ‘Teach well’! But the time commitment to gain a teaching qualification is devalued, since it ‘can reduce opportunities available for research’!

Underlying this version of the academic superhero is the stone base on which the academic world stands, that comprises research-driven inertia, and the mentality that the roneo-researcher wins all, churn ing out ‘high impact’ articles in academic journals, read by few, and published long after the event. There is also a lack of mention of work with and for undergraduate students. The Index, for example lists ‘making known your professional identity to’ students ... using them as data gatherers for your research, and using student work to keep up-to-date. Note the word ‘using’. This distresses me in a world where, broadly speaking, without first degree students we as individual academics and collectively as employing Higher Education Institutions, would cease to exist. As the bible says, ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.’ In other words, an active research life is only half the story of a whole and wholesome academic; teaching and learning are the other half. An addition to the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ might be: Blessed are the teachers for they may bring light to the darkness, and bask in the glow of a life well lived.

On a lighter note! I asked fellow UK National Teaching Fellows (NTFs) what superpowers they sought to facilitate life as a lecturer. And here are their answers...
‘the power to bend time so that I could cope with a hundred tasks simultaneously’

‘The power of cloning...A clone to teach, a clone to mark, a clone to read, a clone to research, a clone to write bids....’

‘The ability to infuse common sense’ into an academic manager

‘an academic who is just content with what she/he can do and can’t do?’ And has time to spare

‘the superpowers of humility and common sense’

‘the power to fall about laughing helplessly when everything seems grim...as well as the capacity then to stop and choose (then enact) three quick actions to do something positive about it all’

‘Juggling’